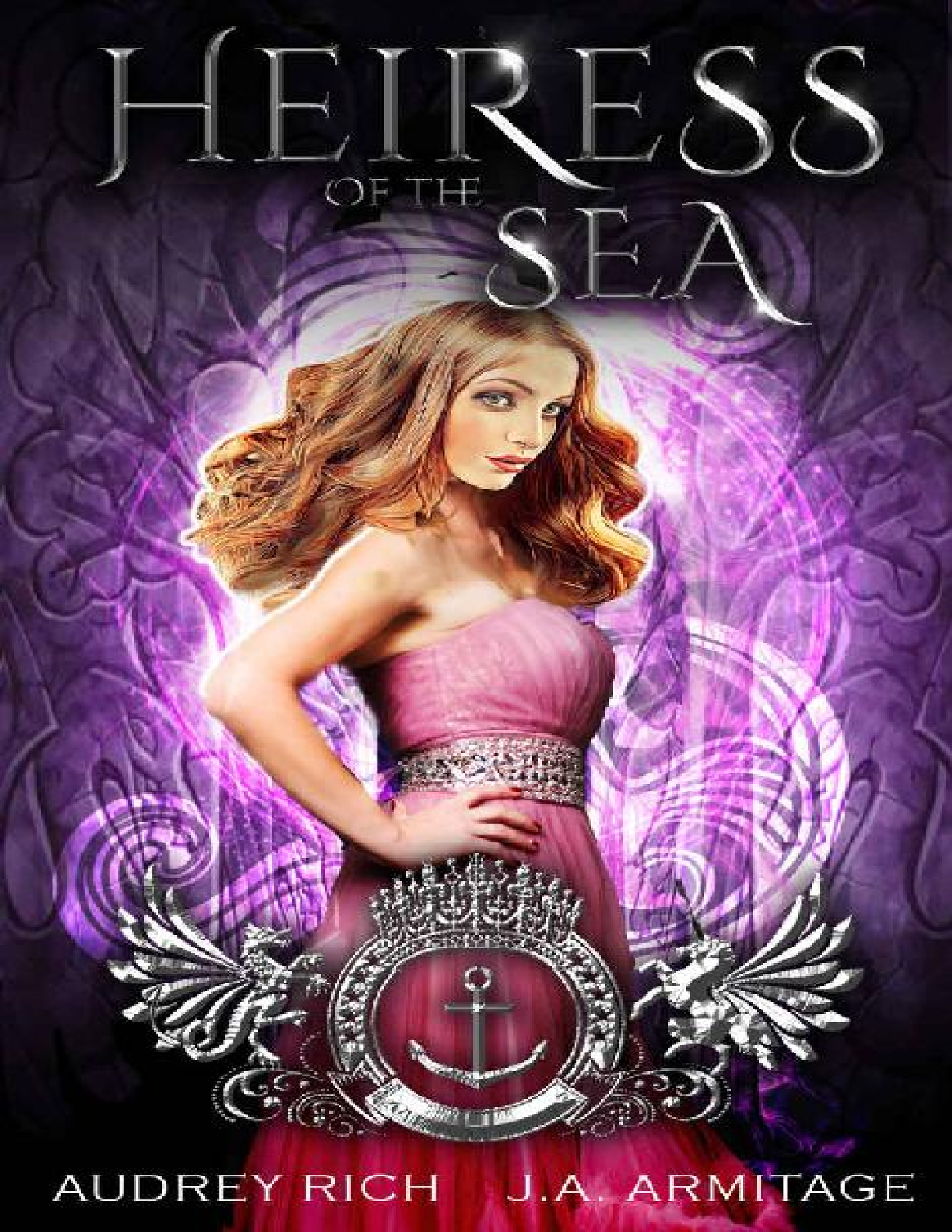
HEIRESS OF THE SEA



AUDREY RICH J.A. ARMITAGE

HEIRESS OF THE SEA

KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES SEASON TWO LITTLE MERMAID BOOK 2

AUDREY RICH

J. A. ARMITAGE

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FAIRYTALES

SEASON TWO - LITTLE MERMAID

These Little Mermaid retellings are season two in the Kingdom of Fairytales saga

Have you read season one yet?

SEASON ONE
SLEEPING BEAUTY
1. Queen of Dragons
2. Heiress of Embers
3. Throne of Fury
4. Goddess of Flames

You don’t have to read season one to enjoy these books, but it is recommended that you do.

You all know the fairytales, the stories that always have the happy ending. But what happens after all those storybook characters get what they wanted? Is it really a happily ever after?

In this prequel, you will find out what happens next, be transported back to those lands you fell in love with and be prepared to meet some new characters along the way.

Kingdom of Fairytales is a new way of reading with one chapter a day and one book a week throughout the year beginning January 1st

Lighting-fast reads you won’t be able to put down

Read in real time as each chapter follows a day in the life of a character throughout the entire year, with each bite-sized episode representing a week in the life of our hero.

Each character’s story wrapped up at the end of every season with a brand new character and story featured in each season.

Fantasy has never been so epic!

5TH FEBRUARY

“Blaise!”

My mother’s screams cut through my brain, taking my thoughts away from the confession I was about to utter.

The pair of us were in the palace pool where my mother had been swimming around in the saltwater paradise my father had created while I’d sat on the edge, letting my feet and lower legs swish around in the water. Apart from my mother’s complaining about the Anti-Mermaid League and the lies printed that very morning in the Conch, and the fact that I felt sick that I had been a very big part of her downfall, it had been a pleasant morning up until the smashing of one of the palace windows.

Moments later, I jumped up from where I’d been perched as a masked intruder ran through the hole he’d just broken in the full-length window. A shiver had run down my spine as the intruder turned his attention briefly to me. His face was covered, but I recognized his eyes. He was a friend of mine. A friend who now had a gun pointed at my mother.

“Who are you?” my mother had demanded, swimming to the edge of the pool.

“He’s AML,” I said softly. No point denying I knew him. I’d been on the verge of telling her my awful secret anyway.

Behind me, I heard the sound of the guards closing in, but I knew they wouldn’t be able to do anything. Not while he had a gun leveled at the queen.

“Shut up, filth,” the man screamed. “Anyone moves any closer, and you’ll be fishing mer-brains from this pool for weeks.”

I held my hands up, frozen into indecision. I'd not asked for this, but if my mother was to die at the hands of the AML, I might as well have pulled the trigger myself. This was all my fault. Years of recruiting for the AML and spouting their propaganda had led to this moment. I tried to remember the guy's name, but my mind fogged up with fear and let me down.

"You are everything that's wrong with Atlantice," he continued, walking closer to my mother, the broken glass crunching beneath his feet.

A winter wind whipped around the room, causing the temperature to drop several degrees.

"I'm the same person I always was," my mother said, showing no fear. I stood in awe of her as the gunman moved ever closer. Only moments before, she'd been complaining as though the AML talking about her was the end of the world, but now that danger was literally staring her in the face, she'd pulled herself together and fearlessly held her own.

"Let's talk about this," I said, trying to keep the situation calm. Escalating it with anger would not help.

"There's nothing to talk about. You are no better than she is," he replied, turning the gun on me.

It was at that point that my mother screamed my name. Now, I ducked as a bullet came whizzing over my head, missing me by inches.

As I ducked, I grabbed the brick that he'd used to smash the window and threw it at his head. It missed, but only because my mother had taken his lapse in concentration and grabbed his leg, pulling him over. As a stream of guards ran in behind me, the man fell into the pool, smashing his head on the side as he went. A stream of red blossomed, muddying the clear water. By the time the guards got to him, he was unconscious. Two of the guards grabbed an arm each and hauled him from the pool as I jumped in to hug my mother.

In all the years I'd lived at the palace, which happened to be all eighteen of them, it was only recently I'd found out that the pool was filled with saltwater rather than fresh. Since my mother's huge revelation, sand, ornaments, and sea plants had been added to the usually boring rectangular pool to turn it into a miniature ocean exclusively for my mother… and for me, if I desired.

Her beautiful tail moved up and down rhythmically as she swam toward me.

There, in the water, she took me in her arms and pulled me into an embrace. I still hadn’t told her that I could breathe underwater, so she hauled me to the surface a moment later.

She must have thought me terribly brave to jump in to her, but the truth was, I wasn’t brave. I was the exact opposite. I was a coward. I was just about to tell her everything when Captain McDougall rushed to the side of the pool.

“He’s been taken care of, Your Highness. I’m awfully sorry this happened. Are you both okay?”

I nodded as my mother spoke.

“We are fine. The pool will need a thorough cleaning, though, and the window will need replacing.”

“I’ll see to all that. Would you like some assistance getting back to your room?”

“Yes, please. Could you have my maid fill me a bath with salt water?”

He beckoned a couple of his men forward to help her out. Seconds later, I found myself being pulled out despite not needing the help. I guess they didn’t know that, though.

Back in my bedroom, after a quick shower, I gazed out of the window as I tried to puzzle out how I could breathe underwater. The simple answer was that I was half-mermaid. But before the intruder had interrupted us, I'd spent the last few hours sitting with my feet in the pool, and they’d remained exactly as they always had been. No tail, no scales, just two normal legs.

Plus, there was the fact that I couldn't swim. The mere thought of water turned my stomach to jelly. I’d jumped in this morning because of my mother, but diving in the heat of the moment was very different from wanting to swim for the mere fun of it. Just thinking about that scared me more than the gunman had.

What kind of mermaid was scared of water? None, I would wager. I'd have thought that being a half-mermaid, I'd feel it more. That I’d feel the call of the sea. I did, to an extent. I enjoyed the salty smell, the gentle lapping of waves. I even enjoyed watching the winter storms churning the sea… from the comfort of my own room through the window.

I didn't, however, have a deep urge to dive into the sea. Far from it.

Nothing made sense. Not when only five days prior, Fish had to save me from drowning.

I'd certainly not been able to breathe then. I'd ended up swallowing what, at the time, felt like half the ocean, but I'd certainly not breathed through it. So what had changed in the past week? If I was a half-mermaid now, I'd certainly been one before my mother's confession. Her telling me about it wouldn't have transformed me. I was either half-mermaid or I wasn't. There was no in-between.

My fingers drummed the window sill.

I understood that Fish and sea creatures breathed underwater because it was their natural habitat.

But a human breathing underwater?

Definitely mindboggling and unfathomable.

How did it happen?

I sighed. Sitting around in my room was going to drive me crazy. My mother was in her bath being looked after, and more guards had been brought in to keep us safe. That was all well and good, but it felt like I was in a prison. My father was out in town doing goodness knew what and guards still patrolled the beach, leaving me stuck here. There was no way my mother would let me go out now. I was going to be trapped at home whether I liked it or not, but there was another way. I'd seen it with my own eyes.

Rifling through my drawer, I found a dry bathing suit. Teaming it with a belt holding my knife—I needed to be able to protect myself—I pulled a robe over the top. A quick note later, saying I was heading out with my friend, and I was ready to go.

Stealing out of my room, I headed along the back corridors until I got to the servants' stairs. They were used more than the other stairs, but they were also the closest to where I wanted to go, and there was less chance a guard would spot me. As luck would have it, I encountered no one as I slipped down the stairs. Holding my breath, I sneaked past the large kitchen door and to the top of yet another set of steps. These led to the palace basement.

The basement was not somewhere I ventured often, but I had been down there a couple of times. It housed cold storage for the kitchens, a wine cellar, and a number of other rooms used for storage. It was also, if I wasn't much mistaken, where I'd find a door to a secret water-logged tunnel that would get me out of the palace without being spotted.

After finding a waterproof bag, I pulled a couple of bottles of water and some food from the cold storage and began to look for the door.

It took a while to find it, hidden as it was behind a unused dresser. A large bolt kept it locked from outside intruders. With a screech of wood on stone, I pulled the dresser away from the door, slid the bolt back, and ventured into the cold tunnel.

Freezing wind rattling down the tunnel took my breath away. I'd forgotten just how much Fish warmed me when I was in his arms. Without his protection, I would surely die of hyperthermia.

It was a risk I was willing to take to find out if he was all right. I'd worried about him all night, and the attack on my mother this morning had only compounded my worry. He'd promised me he'd avoid the coast, but I had a feeling he wouldn't be able to stay away. Now that the AML had left the beach, he would be back, waiting for me.

At least, that was what I hoped as I stepped onto the rickety walkway that lined the tunnel.

I shivered from both cold and fear, walking through the darkness. Gripping the handrail, I edged along, heading towards the spot of light ahead of me, praying he would be close by. The tunnel would bring me out far enough away from the palace that I'd be difficult to spot by any guards patrolling the beach, but it would also take me to where the bitter cold winter wind roared, buffered by the jagged rocks. I would give myself just five minutes before heading back to the palace.

It had seemed like such a good idea when I'd thought about it back in my warm bedroom, but now that I was exposed to the elements, I began to rethink. Who went out in the middle of winter on a blustery day in only a bathing suit and robe? Well, me, but not many others. I shivered wildly as I scanned the horizon. The cold seeped into my bones, chilling me to my core.

I took a few steps out over the wet rocks, getting wetter every second from the sea spray whipped up by the wind. Wrapping the robe tighter around myself, I mentally chastised myself for being so stupid. But while I might not have a mermaid's call to the ocean, I was called to him. He had been my enemy for so long, and yet, I couldn't keep away from him.

"What are you doing?" he asked, breaching the surface. Spray pelted him as he bobbed violently on the water's surface, and he had to grab hold of a rock to stop from being carried away by the current.

“I c-c-came t-to see if you w-w-were a-alright,” I said, my teeth chattering so hard I could barely get the words out.

“So jump in, and I'll warm you up,” he shouted up at me.

I shook my head. If the water scared me when it was calm, that was nothing to the churning in my insides now. Even Fish was struggling to keep in one place. What chance did I have?

“Princess. You are practically blue. It might look scary from up there, but I assure you that under the turbulent surface, it's calm.”

I shook my head again. There was no way the sea could be tranquil under the surface, not with the violence of the waves that hit the shore.

“Take my hand,” he said, holding his free hand to me. “I promise you will be safe. Have I ever let you down?”

“You told me you wouldn't come b-b-back to sh-sh-shore,” I reminded him.

“Yes, but I couldn't keep away, and neither can you, it seems. You're here now. You may as well join me. Unless you want to head back down the tunnel and go home?”

I thought about it. Turning back into the darkness was no more appealing than jumping into the ocean, but here, at least, I had Fish to catch me.

I took hold of his hand, and, all at once, warmth seeped through my body. By the time I pulled off my robe and eased myself into the ocean, my bag slung over my shoulder, I was toasty warm.

I barely had time to catch my breath before I was dragged under the water. Fish held me tightly as he pulled me through the ocean at high speed, returning to the surface every so often to allow me to take a breath.

“What are you doing?” I demanded when he finally came to a standstill in the water away from the coast. Wind whipped our hair around us, bobbing us fiercely in the petulant sea.

“AML,” he said, pushing my hair from my eyes. I clung to him as one would cling to a life raft, fearful that if I let go, I’d be pulled to the bottom of the ocean.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to scare you, but I saw them clashing with your guards, and I thought we should get out of there before they saw you.”

My life was crashing down around me. “Someone almost shot me today. He managed to get into the palace. He was there for my mom.”

“Princess, are you all right?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t. How could I be all right when people I’d counted as friends only a week ago wanted to kill me?

“Stay out here with me, at least for today. I can’t keep you safe on land, but I can in the water.”

“More guards have been brought in,” I said. “The palace is probably the safest place for me now. This has given the guards a shock. I doubt they’ll let it happen again.”

“Princess.” He took my face in his hands as my tears mingled with the sea spray. “I will keep you safe. I won’t let anything happen to you while you are with me. Do you understand?”

I nodded again, hope filling my chest. I already felt safe around him. Even in the middle of the roaring ocean that had always been my most terrifying nightmare, I knew I was safe.

“Ready to go back under?”he asked.I hesitated, then nodded. I took my arms from around his neck and gripped his hand tightly as we slowly drifted under the turbulent surface.

He was right about it being calm under the water. The deeper we dove, the stiller the ocean seemed to be.

My arms and legs glided through the water as we dove deeper, and I found I no longer needed him holding onto me so tightly. My hand in his was enough. I breathed, air somehow filling my lungs. My fingertips skimmed the sandy bottom as we swam to a colorful coral reef containing plants that resembled flowers on land. Golden algae, orange finger sponges, and purple Kenya tree coral blended together in a dazzling display. The colors contrasted against the deep blue of the ocean beyond, akin to fireworks against the darkest of midnight skies, and my problems above the surface drifted away.

Fish lifted his index finger to his lips and pointed to a school of angelfish heading straight toward my legs. They whirled around me, a few touching my calves. Their scaly bodies tickled, but I withheld my laughter. Why disturb their journey?

A pair of tan sea horses hooked their tails as if holding hands. They hovered above a troupe of shrimp weaving in and out of a staghorn coral.

Fish's strong arms encircled my waist, and he pointed upward. I nodded my acceptance, and his strong tail thrust back and forth in rapid motion, propelling us to the surface.

My heart leapt almost as much as we did as we crested the water's surface, arcing over and then diving back in the way I'd seen dolphins do. When we breached the surface again, I couldn't contain my excitement.

“Amazing! I want to learn how to do that. Or is it only merpeople that can reach that high?” I treaded water, maintaining my body in one place, despite the strong waves pushing me side-to-side, although holding onto Fish helped.

“I’m not sure if you’ll reach that height because my tail is stronger than your legs. Maybe learning how to pump your legs as hard as you can will help you jump out of the water.” He scanned the area, his eyes focusing on the boats leaving the Antla bay. “Why don’t we swim to the rocks so we can talk?”

We were close to a rocky outcrop in the next bay along from the palace. It looked to be only thirty or so meters away.

“I'm going to try swimming it by myself,” I said with more confidence than I felt. If I couldn't swim to the rocks and ended up struggling in the rolling sea, I could slip beneath the waves and breathe while I waited for Fish to rescue me.

I wouldn't say that my fear of the sea had gone completely, but it had subsided now that I’d seen the beauty the ocean held.

Fish pulled a face that I hadn't expected.

“You tired?” I asked. “I think I'll be okay if you stay close. It's not that far.”

For the first time since I had met him, he grimaced, his gaze darting this way and that on the water behind me. For a second, I thought that the AML had somehow followed us, but that sounded ridiculous, as we’d swum underwater, and there was no way the AML would be able to track us. Still, the fear in his eyes was real.

“What's wrong?” I asked, getting caught in his panic. I turned to see what had grabbed his attention, but apart from the whites of the waves, I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Without warning, Fish's tail rose, and he slammed it down, splashing my face with droplets of water.

I met his eyes. “What was that for?”

“Sorry,” he said, pulling me closer. “I didn’t mean to splash you, but I wanted to warn a couple of sharks heading our way.”

“Sharks?” I stammered, touching my knife that was still in its sheath. “You were warning them?”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling me towards the rocks, clearly forgetting that I said I'd swim. “My tail splashing was a warning not to come too close. I think they've gone now, but you should sit on the rocks for a few minutes until I'm sure. I can fight and kill one, but while I'm busy brawling, the other would eat you whole.”

My heart lurched at the mere thought of it. I scrambled out of the water while he swam around, his red tail appearing and disappearing in the water. The cold came back in a hurry, so I was glad when he swam back a couple of moments later.

“They're gone,” he announced. “My warning did the trick.”

He reached up to me, finding a loose strand of hair and tucking it behind my ear, creating a whirlwind of tingles that had nothing to do with the cold weather.

“I can't believe you scared off some sharks,” I said as I once again eased myself into the water.

He shrugged. “Technically, my tail doesn’t scare them away, but striking the water with it causes an echo, and they steer away from it.”

“Wow,” I exclaimed, genuinely in awe. “If only you could do that to scare off the AML, then we'd have no problem at all.”

His hands gently touched my chin. “If you are worried about your mother, we can go back. I don’t like the thought of you at the palace, but I’ll understand if you need to get home.”

My lips lifted to form a tiny smile. “My father wants to bring guards from the mainland because of these riots. He’s not home at the moment, but McDougall—that’s the head of the palace guard—has everything in hand. My mother is being very well looked after. I left a note that I was going out, so if they find me gone, they won’t worry too much.” A twist of guilt wrenched my gut as I thought of the vague note I’d left. There was nothing I could do about it now. “The leadership of the AML has lost its mind. Even when I hated merpeople, I never wanted them dead. I may have believed the AML’s lies that merpeople were evil, but I pushed for their removal from our waters, not their death. Never their deaths.” I looked into his eyes. “You believe me, right?” My beating heart raced, waiting for his answer. I wanted him to believe me. I needed him to believe me.

My toes curled up as the back of his hand caressed my cheek.

“I never thought otherwise,” he said. “Do you want to see some more of the ocean bed? I know a spot that has the most beautiful coral.”

I nodded. I'd go wherever he wanted to take me.

We swam together for hours, sometimes on the surface, sometimes underwater. A whole new world opened up to me, a world I'd never known existed. A world of beauty and silence deep beneath the noisy, chaotic world above us.

Hours later, we breached the surface for the umpteenth time, water dripping from us both. Now that I'd seen his world, I felt I understood him a little more. He was such a part of it, his beauty matching the world he inhabited. As he looked at me, I fought the desire to reach out and run my fingers through his hair, letting the water droplets fall through my fingers. I probably would have if he'd not spoken before I got the chance.

“How about we go somewhere else? There is an underwater cavern I want to show you. It will mean walking down one of those tunnels again.”

“No sharks, though?” I teased, thinking back to how scared I'd been traveling through the tunnel the first time. This time, I could swim them with him at my side and wouldn't have to walk along the rickety walkway, all the while worrying about falling in.

He chuckled and shook his head. “I assure you there are no sharks there nor any creatures with large teeth. Nothing for you to be scared of. Not with me.”

I tilted my head. “Do you ever get scared?”

“What do you mean? In the sea?”

I twirled my hair. “In general. What would make your body break out in a sweat?”

“Interesting question. Obviously, I’m not scared of sea creatures humans should avoid because they normally stay far away.” He stared at the boats in the distance near Antla's port. “Uncontrollable evil. Someone with hatred in their heart and the means to destroy everyone would scare me if I had to face them by myself.”

“Yeah, that’s frightening,” I agreed, wondering if he was talking about the AML or someone else.

Behind him, a flash of color caught my attention.

“Can you see that?” I asked, pointing it out to him.

“Yeah, I’ve been watching it. It’s one of your boats. I can see the royal insignia on the side.”

“My boats?” I queried, suddenly worried.

“Not yours, your father’s. It’s a naval boat. Don’t worry. It’s not the AML.”

His eyesight was amazing. I could only just make out the boat, although the strength of the wind was propelling it toward us at considerable speed.

“Want to dive under?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.” He wasn't afraid of the sea, and I refused to be afraid of my father's men. I’d left the palace without telling anyone where I was going. The note I’d left was vague, so it didn’t surprise me at all that McDougall had sent out boats to look for me.

Ten minutes later, the small ship sailed to within about twenty feet from the rocks, and Sergeant Jimenez, one of my father's closest men, stood on the deck. He bowed before he asked, “Your Highness, are you stranded?” His eyes flicked over to Fish. I knew as well as he did that he didn't think I was stranded. He must have seen me through his binoculars and come to investigate.

“Nope, I’m perfectly capable of swimming back.” I smiled sweetly, knowing full well this would get back to my father.

“I can escort you home now,” he said, glancing Fish's way again. “You’ll have to swim over to the boat.”

Crossing my arms, I responded, “I’m not ready to return right now. Maybe later this afternoon or tonight.”

I could see the distrust in his eyes, singling him out as a mer-hater. A few days ago, this information would have thrilled me. Now, it only made me sad.

“Your Highness, I must insist. The situation in Antla is getting worse, and after the trouble this morning, your father has made the decision to leave the palace for a few days in the hopes that things will calm down. He ordered some of the guards to collect your mother and you. You can imagine your mother’s shock when you were nowhere to be found.”

“You mean he wants us to go into hiding?” I’d never thought I’d see the day when my father succumbed to the whims of rioters. Hearing of the gunman must have affected him greatly.

Jimenez nodded. “As I said, it’s only for a few days. A vast number of people known to the guard as AML supporters have been seen entering Antla. Your father thought it prudent to take you and your mother away for a few days for your own safety. I expect they are searching the palace for you now; so if you’ll come with me, I’ll get you home.”

I almost swam to him. I probably would have if he’d not uttered the next three words with such hatred.

“...Away from that.”

“*That* happens to be a friend of mine and not the problem here. Quite the opposite, in fact. My friend is keeping me safe.”

Jimenez shook his head. “I beg to differ. The merfolk are the cause of the problem. If they’d just leave, then half the people of Atlantice wouldn’t have to abandon their homes to march against them.”

I pulled my hands into a fist, anger burning within me. “You are aware that my mother, your queen, is a mermaid. Do you believe she is part of the problem here?”

He suddenly realized what he’d said and started to backtrack, but it was too late.

“Well, no, but… well.”

“I’d appreciate it if you could send word to my parents that I’m safe. Tell them that I’m with a friend. I’ll come back to the palace in a few days when they do. There is no need for them to worry. The rioters cannot get me out here.”

“You’re not seriously thinking of staying out in the ocean?” he blustered, his eyes narrowing.

“I assure you, I’m very serious. Now leave me be and let my parents know I’ll be home in a couple of days. Tell them I’m perfectly safe and…”—I took a deep breath, hardly daring to say it—“I’m with a mer-friend. I think my mother will understand. I’m half-mermaid, after all.”

There. That would stop him. He knew he couldn't disobey a direct order. My parents would be angry with me, knowing I'd sneaked out without their knowledge, but that was a price I was going to have to pay anyway. I knew my mother would get it. She’d lived on land but yearned for the ocean. She couldn’t begrudge me finding out who I really was. Besides, I was an adult by law. I could make my own decisions.

Jimenez’s mouth curled up in disgust at the term “half-mermaid.”

“I don't think...”

“Sergeant, I'm well aware of what you think. I've given you an order, and I expect you to follow it. I'm eighteen now, and I can do as I please. Let my parents know I'm safe and pass on that I’m sorry for not telling them in the first place.”

Sergeant Jimenez saluted. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Not that he had any choice in the matter. He didn't have to like obeying my orders, but he did have to obey them. My parents were going to be pissed when they found out where I was, especially after this morning, but they would get over it. At least, they hadn't sent the whole fleet to look for me. Jimenez would have told me if they had. No, he'd just chanced to catch sight of me while I happened to be near his boat.

I thanked him and waited for him to turn around. Admitting to the world that I was friends with a merman was enough revelation for one day. I wasn't about to let anyone know I could breathe underwater too.

“You were magnificent,” Fish said, throwing me up into the air once the boat was far enough away. I came down with a splash, and when I resurfaced, I did it with a grin on my face. I could tread water without Fish’s help. I'd been doing it while talking to Jimenez and only just noticed. I'd be swimming before I knew it.

Swimming alone was one thing. Regulating my body temperature in the frigid water was another. I grabbed Fish's hand, and immediately, a bloom of warmth crawled up my body.

When Jimenez was far enough away, Fish took me once more to the depths, this time pulling me along at high speed. We slowed down as we came to the entrance to an underwater tunnel. He raised his free hand and pointed at the dark hole. All my fears came rushing back as I realized he wanted me to go in there with him, but as I was about to shake my head, I stopped. My biggest fear was the water, and I was already under it. I was with Fish. I nodded, and we entered the darkness.

A bright green glow emanated from the tunnel walls, allowing me to see where we were going. Phosphorescence, lighting the way. A whole network of paths branched off in all directions, but Fish seemed to know where he was going, so I accepted that I was safe and let him pull me where he wanted to go.

Eventually, we came to an underground room, half-filled with water and half with air. As we breached the surface, musty air filled my lungs, but it was breathable thanks to small holes in the roof of the cave.

“What is this place?” I asked, looking around. It was a little like the tunnel I'd walked through earlier, and, just like that one, there was a door with a small landing area lit by a solitary light.

“These tunnels are a little different from the tunnel you used to leave the palace, although that door also leads to it. Haven't you guessed what it is yet?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I had no idea.

“Let me give you a clue. Look at that.”

He pointed to the door. Next to it, was a letterbox with a pull string.

“This is the mail network. The dolphins use a network of tunnels to deliver mail, and this is where they come when they want to deliver mail to your palace.”

“But I always take the mail out to the pier and call for them,” I exclaimed.

“You might.” Fish shrugged. “But the palace staff doesn't. They drop the mail off here, and they pick it up from that box there. The network is connected to all the post offices in Atlantice, not to mention, the houses of Atlantice’s richest inhabitants.”

I’d never guessed that dolphins swam under Atlantice as well as around it. The whole kingdom held veins of waterways so frequent they were more common than roads. I’d just assumed the dolphins delivered the post that way.

“You brought me here to show me the mail?” I asked, turning to him.

“That’s part of it, but there is another reason.” He grinned at me. “Watch this.” He swished his tail, and, as he did, the cave lit up with a shimmering glow. He pulled me into the water as the displaced phosphorescence glowed like a million twinkling lights in a dark, starry night.

We rose to the surface slowly, with me in his arms. As it had before, the urge to run my fingers through his hair was immense, but unlike before, I didn’t stop myself. As I brushed the hair away from his face, the fleshy part of my palm grazed his temples. He lifted his hand up and gripped my wrist. I was about to apologize for being so forward when I realized his intention. He wasn’t pulling me away. He was pulling me closer.

He was pulling me closer, and I let him. When our faces were mere inches apart, he stopped, allowing me, as he had always done, to make the

decision for myself. It was an easy one. I leaned forward and touched my lips to his. Then and only then, he pulled my body closer, my bathing suit against his naked chest, and I abandoned myself to his kiss.

6TH FEBRUARY

Fish’s breath drew me out of a deep, peaceful slumber. I didn’t want to wake and face the reality of what I’d done, but then I remembered the kiss. Almost subconsciously, I raised my fingers to my lips and grinned. I still harbored guilt over leaving my family when they needed me the most, but waking on a warm sandy bed with gentle waves lapping at my toes next to Fish made everything worth it. He’d taken me to a cave a little way down the coast where we’d held hands and watched the sunset until I’d fallen asleep in his arms.

“Morning, Princess. Sleep well?” He kissed my forehead.

I lowered my fingers and snuggled closer. My eyes fluttered open. “Definitely.” I bit the inside of my cheek to stop my lips from spreading so wide that the corners hurt. “How about you?”

“Perfectly, with you in my arms.” He planted a quick peck on my lips.

“You know, Princess isn’t my name. I’m...”

As I spoke, another wave came in, higher this time, drenching the pair of us and cutting off my train of thought. The tide was coming in.

“What are the plans for today?” I asked, pulling myself closer to him, enjoying the warmth spreading through me. I couldn’t go back to the palace, nor could I head anywhere on land, but I found I didn’t want to. “Another beautiful coral reef? Or… we could stay here?” I said shyly. This was all new to me, but the feeling of lying next to someone, next to him, was not something I wanted to end in a hurry.

His laughter tickled my ears as his chest shook. I pulled back to meet the deliciousness of his green eyes.

His hair held a coating of sand, and it clung to the side of his face where he'd slept on it.

He spread his fingers and pushed back his long hair, allowing the waves to fan it against his neck. "This cave will be filled with water within an hour." He laughed. "I've been thinking about it, and I want you to see my home after we have breakfast."

My heart didn't know whether to stop beating or race or do both.

"You're taking me to the mer-village?"

The idea both prompted my nerves to pull tight and my heart to race from excitement. I'd seen the ocean with him yesterday. We'd explored reefs and swam with fishes, but I'd not seen another merperson all day. I knew they lived in their own version of towns and villages underwater, but until now, I'd not put much thought into it.

"The mer-village off the coast of Antla. It'll be safe there as long as we don't breach the surface, and you can see how we live." He cocked his head, and the back of his fingers caressed the top of my cheek before trailing to my jawline. "But only if you want to go. If not, there are a thousand other places I could take you." His dimples appeared. "So, do you want to see my home?"

Of course, I wanted to see it. I wanted to know everything about this new world. I found myself excited about the prospect of meeting Fish's friends and learning more about him.

"I'd love to see where you grew up."

A sadness flitted in his eyes before he smiled. "I'm not from Antla originally," he reminded me. "I'll take you to my birthplace one day if you want." He blew air out. "After everything has calmed down and we're not hunted. I wouldn't want to lead those rioters to my birth home."

Neither of us spoke. His thoughts probably headed in the same direction mine did, to when we could live peacefully together. Humans and merfolk.

"Let's find food and then explore other areas instead of brooding in this cave." He held out his hand, and I took it

We swam out in the ocean until we reached a new coral reef. In the middle of the reef, he signaled for me to remain quiet as he hunted a tuna.

Without his hand touching me, the cold began to seep in, but watching him weave through the water and masterfully blend in with the other wildlife took my mind from the biting cold.

He caught a fish and, after bringing me to the surface, filleted it on a rock using my knife to help.

“Normally, I’d just bite into this, but I know you land people are more sophisticated.” He grinned, passing me a lump of the flesh.

Raw fish was not something I’d ever tried, but as my food supply was dwindling, I let it fall down my throat. It tasted better than I had expected, and I found myself wanting more. After a feast of fish swigged down with the water I’d brought from the palace, he led me to a passage in between large stands of seagrass. We stopped at a large coral reef with the grass growing at least ten feet tall around it.

“Let’s go in.”

He’d never spoken to me under the water before, always waiting until we were over the surface to talk. His voice sounded strange, almost like an echo reverberating through the water. I tried the same, expecting no sound to come out. I’d certainly never been able to talk underwater before, or at least, I’d never tried. I was surprised to find I could hear my own voice, albeit as distorted as Fish’s was.

I squinted to where he pointed. “Where?”

He pulled the seagrass apart and pointed to a hole in the ground. “In here. The tunnel is about fifty yards long and will take us under the reef.”

“Talk about hiding it really well.” I wouldn’t have seen it, shielded as it was.

“The entire village is concealed within the reef..”

My eyes took a while to adjust to the dark tunnel, but I found that the longer I spent underwater, the more quickly I adapted to my surroundings. Before long, I could make out the thousands of tiny fish that swam along with us. We dove deeper, then swam up toward a tiny light that expanded as we ascended. When we finally exited the tunnel, the underwater kingdom appeared. Its palace, almost the size of mine, rose above us with its splendor of towers and walls made from coral of every color.

“What do you think?” He grinned. “Stunning, isn’t it?”

My gaze slid from one end to another, and my mouth hung open. “It’s beautiful!” I murmured. And it was. Tall spires rose majestically atop the prettiest building I’d ever seen. The entire palace was a living organism with not a flat surface in sight. Fish swam in and out through the windows, making the whole place seem as though it was moving.

“I love coming in from the east corridor. Every time I see the palace arising from behind the village, it gives me goosebumps.”

“I can see why.” I couldn’t stop gawking at the impressive structure.

He looked over at me. “I’m so glad you like it.”

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I whispered, reaching for his hand. “Is the mer-king as involved in the lives of the villagers as my dad is?”

“I’d say about the same. Since the palace is the center of our village, nothing occurs without the king’s approval or knowledge. He’s not listed as an official king of one of the kingdoms like your father is, as here underwater, we officially come under Atlantice's borders, but the merpeople have their own rules and laws that do not apply to the land folk. Twice a month, he holds court specifically to hear the villagers’ troubles.”

“Similar to my dad, except he does it once a week. Our villagers have many issues.” I twisted my lips. “I guess that’s a big understatement.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Princess. Everything will work out eventually. It may take a while, but it will work out. Your father seems to have the situation in hand.”

“Thank you.”

We continued along the path, similar to an unpaved street with a sandy floor in Antla. Intricate passages broke off from the main path, with more houses appearing on either side and at the end of them.

The village seemed devoid of any life. I scanned the area, but it seemed we were the only ones there.

He released my hand to point out the colorful plants on a window sill at the end of one of the paths. “They change the foliage every couple of weeks and during major holidays. You should come during Christmas. The plants brighten up that entire section.”

“It’s lovely now, and I can’t imagine how spectacular it must be during Christmas.” My eyes widened at the display of colorful plants along our path. “Do you think I could bring some back to the palace? I haven’t ever seen these, and I think my mom would love them for her pool.”

Fish shrugged. “Remind me when we pass the flower shop. I know the florist, and he can give us a good price.”

It seemed weird to me that merfolk would shop as we did when they could hunt fish, but as they had houses and streets, it made sense that they would shop, too. If only Hannah could see how civilized it all was, how similar to our world on land.

The edge of the town appeared empty until we turned onto a wider street. A few merpeople swayed in front of the shops, talking amongst themselves. A few waved but most stared, narrowing their eyes, much the way Jimenez had at Fish.

There was no doubt in my mind they were staring at me.

Focusing my attention on the shops, I maintained my smile, ignoring the dirty looks as we passed. Up ahead, a couple of mermaids swam into the street, whispering to each other and pointing our way.

Fish halted. His eyes narrowed at the two mermaids, who caught his stare and turned around to laugh privately.

When I spotted the flower shop filled with all types of plants outside, I picked up my pace, dragging Fish with me. “I want to see the plants and buy a few,” I said, pointing at the shop window.

He shook his head. “There’s no time for shopping.” The curtness in his tone startled me.

My mouth dropped open. “Why not? We don’t have to be anywhere soon, do we?”

He raised his voice. “I’ve told you there is no time. Besides, you have no money.”

Something had happened during our short swim. Only minutes before, he’d said that he’d get me a good price for the beautiful sea plants, and now there was no time? The coldness in his voice tugged at my chest, but his words sparked a fire in me.

“Listen to me, I’m the…”

He jerked me around until our bodies touched and whispered in my ear, “Don’t you dare mention you’re the princess. Here, in this village, you’re just an ordinary girl with the ability to breathe underwater, do you understand?”

The pain in my chest magnified at the way he spoke to me. My eyes widened, and I restrained the tears welling behind them.

What was wrong with him? He’d never raised his voice to me. Not once. Not even when he was surrounded by the rioters. He had always maintained his cool.

“Understood, but when we reach our destination, you will tell me what in all of shellfish land is wrong with you,” I whispered, gritting my teeth. “And I want answers. Do you hear that?”

He didn’t acknowledge my words but released my arm.

Thousands of pins pricked my heart, but I pushed away the pain. It wasn't the right time for tears, but I was angry.

Whatever had happened just now had nothing to do with me. He was taking whatever it was out on the wrong person.

I pulled away from him to look at a statue of a young mermaid on a rock. I didn't want him to know he'd caused my tears. The statue was beautifully sculpted, though weathered by the sea and covered in places in green algae.

When I finally turned around, Fish hovered above me.

He crossed his arms. "We need to go."

Another prick punctured my heart, but anger replaced my hurt.

"You might need to go," I shouted, "but I can do what I want."

Embarrassed, I turned my head as a line of merpeople watched our little spat from outside their shops. I began to shiver with the cold, but I refused to hold his hand, even though without doing so, I didn't have the benefit of his heat.

"You are freezing," he exclaimed, taking my hand. I didn't attempt to stop him as he began to pull me through the water again. One day, I would have to learn how to regulate my body temperature in the icy seas, but I'd not quite managed that yet, and I needed Fish whether I liked it or not.

We swam past dozens of merpeople, each with their arms crossed, heads lowered, and tight lips on long, drawn faces. Their eyes followed us. Even the mer-children glared my way.

Why are they so upset? I wondered. These were not the merpeople that Fish described. He had said that they would help humans, protect them. But these merpeople looked at me as though I'd trailed dog dirt through their homes.

Fish glanced at me every so often, but I remained stoic. No need for him to see my anger.

Finally, he stopped in front of a large coral-made house. No fence or tall seagrass decorated the front, but it rested on top of a huge rock foundation, making it stand out from all the other houses we'd passed.

A huge merman with jagged short hair, hacked off no doubt by a knife or sharp rock, opened the door and bowed. "Good evening, sir," he said to Fish.

I followed Fish into his home, giving the merman a clipped smile.

“Evening, Alfred. As you can see, I’ve brought a guest. Can you make sure the guest room is ready?”

Alfred lowered his eyes slightly, then swam from the room, leaving me alone with Fish.

“What the hell was that back there?” I laid into him.

He sighed and placed both hands above his heart. “I’m sorry. No human has ever come down here before. I wasn’t expecting the reaction we got, and it stressed me out. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.”

I shook my head, my red-blond hair fanning until it landed over my shoulders and back. “Well, you did extremely well for someone who wasn’t trying. You treated me like crap.”

Alfred coughed, announcing his presence. “Sir, sorry to interrupt, but, some of the ladies of the town are here to see you.”

“Ah, the welcome committee,” Fish sighed.

Before Alfred could answer, five mermaids rushed in with their hands on their hips. They threw kill-her-now looks my way before a brunette yelled, “How could you bring her here?” She pointed at me. “Have you lost your mind?”

Some freaking welcoming committee!

He lifted his hands. “Please, ladies, calm down. Let’s not shriek.”

A voluptuous redhead waved her index finger at him, “She needs to know she isn’t welcome here. We don’t need any of those filthy humans in our village, especially her and her filthy…”

Fish pushed his palm in front of her face and shouted, “Stop. This is my friend. Don’t insult her while she’s in my home.”

The blonde pointed at the door and yelled, “She needs to leave. Right. Now.”

I wanted to grab her long hair and pull it until she begged for mercy and apologized, but I figured if Fish wanted to defend me against these witches, then I’d let him do it. He needed to make up for the way he’d talked to me earlier.

“Ladies, she’s a guest in my home, so I’ll be the one deciding if she stays or not. In fact, it’s time for you to leave. Alfred, please escort them out.”

They muttered obscenities but followed Alfred. Once they were gone, Alfred headed back to us. Fish whispered something in his ear, eliciting a nod from Alfred before he left.

“What is wrong with them?” I asked once the mermaids were out of earshot.

Fish stiffened his back.

“Why are they so hostile? Why don’t they want me here?”

He glanced over his shoulder while he swam toward me. “Why don’t we eat? You must be hungry.”

“Don’t try to redirect,” I hissed, placing my hands on my hips. “I’m not a two-year-old.”

He sighed before answering. “For the longest time, merfolk didn’t much care one way or another about humans. We interacted with them on a daily basis. They stuck to land, we stuck to water, and on the rare occasion we met in the middle, everyone was pleasant.”

“But?”

“A couple of months ago, the AML started getting more hostile. You should know about that. Merfolk stopped being welcome at the shops along the waterways. We found it harder to get the things we needed. It’s caused a lot of resentment, as you can imagine.”

“That’s why they were whispering?”

“I didn’t want you worrying, and I really hoped that they would accept you when they saw you breathing underwater.”

It wasn’t my fault that Fish was being an ass, but it was my fault those mermaids hated me the way they did.

“Maybe I should apologize for my part in that? Tell them how sorry I am that humans are hunting them and causing them problems.”

His head dropped. “You saw them, they don’t want to listen.”

I lowered my eyes and stared at the sand. “Then maybe I should leave?”

He rushed over and held my hand. “It doesn’t matter what they want. I want you here. I’ll do whatever I need to do to keep you here. To keep you happy. I was a jerk earlier, and I’m sorry.”

I went to the window. A group of mermaids swam by, pointing their fingers at me. They rolled their eyes and flipped their hair.

I wondered if it was just to do with resentment of me being a human. The way those girls looked at me felt personal. As they swam, one of them looked back. This time she wasn’t looking at me. She winked at Fish, throwing him a small wave before sashaying away.

Then it hit me. It wasn't just because of who I was, but because of who I was with. They were jealous of me because of Fish, not that I could blame them.

They hated my legs, and they hated the fact that I was with Fish. Jealousy, pure and simple.

Double whammy!

I turned to Fish. Swimming toward him, I held out my hand for him to take.

He pulled me toward him, wrapping his hands around my waist. I only had eyes for him, but I hoped those witches could see me through the window.

"I really messed up back there. I mean it when I say I'm sorry. I brought you here, and while you are here, you are my responsibility."

"I'm no one's responsibility but my own," I pointed out.

He nodded. "You're right. I don't want to hurt you, though. The way I treated you was on me, and I royally messed it up."

I nodded. "You did." My lips curled up at the edges. It was hard to stay mad at him when he was so breathtakingly gorgeous.

He kissed my cheek and led me through his dwelling.

Fish's house astounded me in its size and beauty. The notion that all merfolk lived in gloomy caves was completely dispelled as he gave me a tour.

"This belonged to my parents, but they died a few years back," he explained as he escorted me through the winding passages. "It's all mine now. I inherited the house and Alfred, plus enough money to keep me going and pay Alfred's wages for a good few years."

"You have no siblings?"

He shook his head. "No, it's just Alfred and I. I've asked him to go to the surface and buy you some food. And bottles of water. I don't stock fresh water because I don't need it, but I've seen that your own bottles are nearly empty, and I didn't want to keep feeding you raw fish."

I was touched that he'd thought to do that.

"I thought the shops were refusing to sell to merfolk now?"

Fish nodded. "Most are, but I'm a good customer and pay well. Some are losing money because they are scared to sell to us. I'm telling you now, there can't be many shopkeepers in the AML. This is harming their businesses."

I thought back to all the AML members I knew. I couldn’t think of a single shopkeeper within the ranks.

After a strange dinner of salty wet bread and cold, already cooked meat, which was all Alfred could source, Fish took me to one of the rooms in his house that he’d not shown me before. The entire room was filled with flowers of every kind clinging to the walls and ceiling. The only part of the room not covered in flowers was the floor, which held a raised area of sand.

“I asked Alfred to make this room up for you to sleep in. I wish I could stay in here with you,” he said. “But if Alfred knew I slept with you, he’d talk. He’s a great servant, but lousy at keeping secrets. If the townspeople found out...”

A shiver pulled at my heart when I realized he meant me to sleep here alone.

“We slept next to each other last night,” I pointed out.

His smile disarmed me, and I wanted to grab hold of him and not let him go until morning.

“That was away from the townsfolk. There will be enough gossip with you just being here, and I don’t want to make it harder on you. It doesn’t mean I won’t be thinking about you all night.” He moved forward and cupped my face in his hands. When he kissed me, I kissed back, urgency in my lips, hoping it would make him change his mind, but eventually, he pulled back.

He smiled at me in a way that made my heart leap with joy and brought his fingers to his lips.

“Princess,” he said, “with kisses like that, you’re gonna kill me!”

He left the room through the long seagrass covering the door, and I fell back on the sandy bed, my heart jittering with happiness. Who cared if the people on land hated us, and the people below the sea hated us? We had each other, and I needed no one else.

7TH FEBRUARY

The sound of a commotion woke me from a deep sleep. Not exactly a peaceful one, but not a tossing-and-turning-all-night one, either. My body refused to leave the sandy floor to investigate the noise.

I rolled over onto my back and placed my hands underneath my head. The ceiling above me undulated in the warm current, a riot of hues that mesmerized me with their beauty.

The yelling became louder, forcing me to sit up. I could ignore it no longer. Fish's voice, the only male one as far as I could tell, sounded frustrated but in control. Not that I could hear his words. The women's voices shrilled, but no matter how much I strained to hear the context of their shrieks, I couldn't decipher any of their words.

I stood and ran my fingers through my hair. It was knotted from days of being underwater, but as I had not thought to bring a brush with me, I had to be content with using my fingers.

Their thundering voices died down for a minute before starting up again much more loudly. I rushed out of the flowered room and followed the sound.

A minute later, I halted in the middle of the front room, staring at the scene unfolding right outside the window.

The crowd, made up of eight mermaids, surrounded Fish with all their hands in the air, their wild gestures somehow in tune with their shouted words.

A cacophony of shrieks emanated from them as they all tried to speak over each other, resulting in a garbled mess of words. Maybe they were sirens who hadn't yet learned to lure their prey with sweet singing.

The mermaids pointed at the house, so I ducked back from the window. I heard one of them scream the word “princess” before going back to her incoherent babble. I gave it a minute, then peeked back out.

Fish was talking to them calmly now, and their focus was back on him.

Any other man might have lost his cool, but not him. He maintained his calm.

Alfred appeared beside me. “Is everything all right, miss? You look concerned.”

I pointed outside. “A mob of mermaids seems to be accosting…” I didn’t say his name, and it occurred to me I still didn’t know it. After everything we’d gone through in the past couple of days, I’d not thought to ask him his name. “They appear ready to pull his arms apart and feed his body to barracudas.”

Alfred chuckled. “Don’t worry, they won’t touch him. They’re upset, and they’ll scream and holler like starving banshees, but they won’t touch him. They wouldn’t dare.”

I focused on the mermaids but peeked back at Alfred’s face, wondering if he believed his own words. “Why won’t they? They sound pretty upset. If they were piranhas, they’d have their teeth sharpened and ready to devour him until only his skeleton remained.”

“They know he’s protected by the king, and they wouldn’t want to upset our king. Besides, they all like him too much to hurt him.”

For some reason, I didn’t like that any better.

“They like him too much?”

He grinned. “The master has never had to worry about being lonely. He has his fair share of admirers.” When he saw my face, he added, “You are the first he’s brought back here, though. Now, don’t you worry about him. He can fend for himself. Is there anything I can get you? Some breakfast, perhaps?”

I was about to tell him that I couldn’t face breakfast when Fish swam in, leaving the mermaids outside. He took one glance at my fingers and engulfed them with his hand. “I hope you weren’t too worried about them. They’re harmless.” His dimples appeared. “I’m starving. Would you like to eat?”

I nodded. Now that Fish was back, my appetite returned with a vengeance.

“Alfred, I think the salmon should be available for pickup.”

“Yes, sir.” He bowed and left.

I stared out the window. More people passed by, waving their fists at me. “Are they all prejudiced against humans?”

“Not everyone,” Fish said, wrapping his arms around me. I was no longer cold in his house, but his touch set my soul ablaze. “Unfortunately, because of the rioting, plenty are adamant about their dislike for humans at the moment.”

I reeled away from the window. “What did that mermaid say about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard one of them shouting ‘princess.’”

“Let’s leave it alone and wait for our food.”

I circled around to face him. “Please don’t hold things back from me. It’s not fair to me. Why do they hate me such much?”

Fish cupped my face gently and placed a kiss on my forehead. “The last thing I want to do is hurt you.” He hugged me, his muscular arms holding me tight without squeezing.

“Then don’t. Tell me the truth and let me deal with it.”

He pulled back, and his fingers stroked my cheek. “They know who you are. That’s why they came back this morning. They found out that not only were you a part of the AML but that you spread AML propaganda. They want revenge for the AML hunting their men. Unfortunately, they didn’t want to hear you weren’t a part of the hunting rioters or that you never wanted to hurt anyone. They’re out for their pound of flesh, and you’re now their biggest target.”

“How did they find out? You never mentioned my name.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled. “Some of the mermaids recognized you.” He looked away. “They know some of the merpeople you used to taunt. I tried to tell them that you’ve changed and feel remorse for what you did, but they wouldn’t listen to me.”

A slight pressure surrounded my heart as I admitted to myself that they had every right to be upset. I’d never personally taunted any merfolk, but I’d been right there with Hannah plenty of times while she had. I sighed. How would I make things right?

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I know that’s not who you are. Not anymore.”

“But it’s only been since I’ve met you that my heart has changed. And Emma, my maid. Both of you pointed out that not all merpeople were

guilty of the crimes the AML said they were." I placed my head against his chest. "I understand their reasoning because I'm guilty of what they accuse me of."

"No, you're not. Maybe you used to be, but all I see before me is a warm-hearted girl who wouldn't hurt anyone. I see the remorse for what you've done. But right now, they won't listen to reason. They've hardened their hearts despite my explanations. Even the merpeople who have friends above the water and know the truth can't talk sense into them."

"They may not be able to, not now. The reason for their hatred is too fresh in their minds," I said in a defeated tone, one I didn't like, but I couldn't control. "I can hardly blame them. They are no different from how I used to be not so long ago. It took a lot to make me understand how wrong I was. It took my mother turning into a mermaid."

"Turning back into a mermaid," he pointed out. "Again, I'm so sorry. Instead of protecting you from the rioters, I've led you into a den of hatred. It seems we are just as bad off down here. It never used to be this way. A couple of months ago, everything was fine, but then things changed. I'm not sure why. Our seas are much more choppy than usual, even for winter, and it's making everyone crabby."

I placed my hand on his chest, allowing my palm to feel his strong, beating heart. "It's not your fault. It's mine. If I hadn't joined the AML and been mean to all the merpeople I encountered, they wouldn't be upset with me now. My own actions have led to their hatred."

His hand caressed my hair, with slow, gentle strokes. "You were blinded by the words of the AML."

"Yes, but I could have investigated the AML's information, talked to fishermen, and come to my own conclusions. If I had actually used my brain, I could have discovered years ago that our information was derived from unsubstantiated pirate hearsay and not to be relied on. Maybe I could have even talked to merpeople and asked questions instead of blindly believing the propaganda. All those wasted years hating merpeople for nothing." I shook my head. "I've been so dumb."

He ran his hand down my head, tangling his fingers in my hair when he reached my nape. "No, you're not dumb. Misguided, maybe."

Guilt reigned deep in my soul. "My influence increased the AML's numbers."

"Please don't blame yourself." He rubbed my back.

The desire to sob until my tears ran out subsided. I needed to get a grip on my emotions and not fall apart.

I made a difficult decision, no matter how much my heart bled.

I leaned my head back to gaze into his eyes and take them in. “I need to leave.”

Fish pulled back, lifted my chin, and met my eyes. “Where shall we go?”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “You stay here. I’ll return to the palace. My parents aren’t there, but I should be. Not hiding here, away from all my problems. I’m only causing more for you..”

“They won’t harm you here, no matter how much they yell and scream. You’re safe in my home.”

I smiled at his words. “I know you’ll protect me, but I need to be at the palace. It was a mistake to come here.”

“I don’t think you’ll be safe there,” he said, furrowing his brow.

“The palace is full of guards. The captain of the guard won’t let anyone in.”

“The captain of the guard may well be with your parents,” he pointed out.

I nodded. He was right. McDougall probably would be with my mother and father, but there were more than enough guards left to keep me safe.

I touched my hand to his face. “We have so many guards, and no one outside of the palace will even know I’m there. They’ll think I’m with my parents or here in the sea with you.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” He trailed his fingers down my cheek. “I don’t want to lose you.”

My heart skipped a beat. “I know that if I need anything, I just have to reach the water, and you’ll magically appear.”

He chortled loud enough that his chest trembled. “It’s not magic, but I’ll be close by.”

I gazed into his gorgeous green eyes. “And how often will you search for me?”

“Every single minute of the day when I’m not with you.” He dipped his head and kissed me.

My toes curled, my blood warmed, and tingles ran all over my body. The man sure could kiss.

The sound of coughing prompted us to end the kiss. Why did he have to come now?

“Sir, I have the salmon you requested.”

“Oh, thank you, Alfred.” He took the salmon and motioned for me to follow him

We brought the fish with us as we swam from the house. This time, instead of taking me through the mer-city streets, we swam around the edge and out into the open sea without anyone seeing us. Fish munched on chunks of salmon, but my stomach couldn’t handle any more raw fish. A warm meal was the only thing I was looking forward to on getting home.

I kept the thought of having the cooks prepare a huge hot meal for me at the forefront of my mind. Anything to keep it away from the pain that was already forming.

I planned to come back to the sea often to see him, but in the current climate, I wasn’t sure it would be possible. At least, we had the secret tunnel, so I wouldn’t have to walk up to the palace across the beach.

An hour later, we arrived at the underground door through the extensive network of tunnels. Fish wrapped his arms around me. “Promise me that you’ll stay in the palace and listen to your guards.”

I raised my hand and touched my heart. “I promise to stay safe within the four walls of this palace and not venture outside it.”

“Good. I don’t want anything to happen to you, and I can’t protect you out of the water.” His tone sounded unsure. “I really wish I had legs.”

I almost laughed. “Please don’t worry about me. Between the guards and my trusty knife, I’ll be fine.”

He kissed me as his thumb trailed the curve of my ear and whispered, “Meet me tomorrow?”

“I’m planning on it.”

He kissed me once more and then began to backstroke, not breaking eye contact. “Tomorrow.”

I nodded my head.

He bent his body, flapped his tail in the air twice, and disappeared into the water.

The door was unlocked, exactly as I’d left it. I slipped through, bolted it from the inside, and pushed the dresser back in place. Apart from a tell-tale displacement of dust, it looked exactly as it had before.

This time, instead of sneaking into the kitchen, I announced my presence.

The cook, a sturdy woman in her early sixties who was kneading a ball of dough, glanced up and down at my bathing suit and matted hair and narrowed her eyes.

“We wondered when you’d be returning.” She pulled out an assortment of food, which she assembled on gold plates. “Your parents have been worried sick.”

Guilt twisted in my stomach. “Did Sergeant Jimenez tell them where I was?”

She returned to the dough she’d been kneading, bashing it roughly with her hands.

“I guess someone told them. I heard that you were out in the ocean.”

“I was. How did they take the news?” I should have told them myself!

She stopped kneading and looked up at me. “Your father was annoyed and rightfully so, but your mother thought it was hilarious. I think she thought you’d be back within the hour, what with you being afraid of water. You should tell John you’re back so he can get word to them.”

John was the palace chief advisor and pretty much in charge when the royals were out.

I picked up a couple of finger sandwiches and nabbed a tall glass of coconut water before thanking the cook and heading to my bedroom. I would have killed for a hot meal, one that didn’t involve fish, but I needed to take off the bathing suit I’d been wearing for days and wash all the salt out of my hair. A hot meal would have to wait.

I stood inside the doorway, smiling at how normal my room appeared. My sanctuary, which allowed me to ignore all the worries of the world and relax, smelled like the sea. It held all my favorite things. I removed the belt with my knife and flung it on the bed.

I meandered to the bathroom, washed the sand off my body, and thoroughly shampooed my hair. With a towel wrapped around me, I glanced at the lavender nightgown with gold trim and matching robe on my bed. Dependable Emma never failed. No matter what happened, she always made sure everything I required was at my fingertips.

Slipping on both the silky nightgown and robe, I sat on the bed and ate my sandwich. I slowly sipped my drink, leaned back, and closed my eyes.

Footsteps outside my door prompted me to open my eyes. My hand reached for my knife where I'd left it on the bed.

Emma entered the room with a basket full of my sandals and shoes, all shiny and almost new. Her mouth formed a slight O before her lips curved into a genuine smile. She bobbed and rushed in, setting the basket by the closet. "I didn't know you were back! I've cleaned your everyday footwear so that it all looks like new. This was my last basket." She said it all in one breath.

"Thank you, Emma. Do you know if my parents are all right?"

I still hadn't been to see John. It was on my list of things to do.

Emma nodded and sat beside me on the bed. I offered her a finger sandwich, which she took.

"They left yesterday. One of your father's naval men came to the door and told them he'd spoken to you out in the ocean. He said you were with a merman."

My cheeks colored at her words. I nodded my head, and she giggled.

"Your father was certainly surprised."

I cringed. I should have told them. "Was he mad?"

"More shocked than mad. Your mother told him in no uncertain terms that you were an adult now. She did ask that word be sent to her as soon as you got home, though. They were worried about you. I should go and speak to a messenger."

"Please, can you speak to the chief advisor? He will send word."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What's it like out there?" I asked her as she stood.

"The riots are still happening. It's like the whole of Antla is caught up in it, and both sides are arguing. It's like everyone has an opinion on the matter."

"Isn't it totally awful?"

She nodded, and I found myself wanting to tell her everything.

I took a deep breath, and all my guilt, my worries, the mermaids screaming at Fish—everything—spilled out like hot lava from a volcano. I kept nothing from her. Tears accumulated behind my eyes.

"Everyone hates me. Humans because my mom transformed into a mermaid, which I had no control of, and merpeople because of how mean I was to some of them. It was always Hannah that shouted the insults, but I never stopped her." I clutched my head. "They didn't want to hear my

apology, my pleas for forgiveness. They only wanted to shout at me. It's why I came home. I was making things worse."

"Oh, Princess Blaise, that must've been awful. It is not fair for them to act that way."

"They had every right. The AML has been the cause of the troubles right from the start, and I was a big part of that." I sighed. "If you were me, what would you do?"

She sat back down and thought. "Princess Blaise, you are in a unique position. You are the only person who is an active member of the AML who has also been to the mer-city."

"Former member of the AML," I said, butting in.

She nodded. "I would speak to the people so they can come together." She wrung her hands. "They need to hear you talk honestly to them. Apologize if you have to. Even beg them to let go of their grudges because keeping them will only hurt them." She nodded. "You need to do whatever you can to get everyone to let go of these prejudices from both sides. There is no point in talking to only one side of this mess. If you can reach everyone involved, then it might work."

"If only it could be done. It would be amazing if both groups gathered and I could convince them that we should work together. But neither side will listen." I sighed. "There is nothing I can do. It's so hopeless."

She walked over to my jewelry box and picked up one of my tiaras.

"With both the king and queen in hiding, you're the only one the townspeople will listen to. You are the head of the kingdom."

"Me?" I almost laughed. "Oh, no. I'm not the head. I'm only eighteen. I'm barely old enough to do anything."

"Age doesn't matter. What matters is that you speak honestly and with confidence." She rubbed one of the jewels on the tiara with a satin rag pulled from her pocket. "You've been trained to rule. You need to make everyone listen to you."

I shook my head. "I'm not prepared. I know how to hold the right fork, to set up a royal ball, to wear the right clothes, but not to rule a kingdom. And definitely not to help these two groups of people heal their differences. I wish I could, but I'm not ready."

Emma continued rubbing each jewel on my tiara, with strong strokes. "You see this tiara?" She raised it to eye level, the jewels creating colored rainbows against the walls. "This is the one you were to wear for the ball.

It proves that you are a princess. Not an ordinary Atlanticean, but its future ruler. It means that the people must listen to you."

My eyes widened as I gawked at the tiara my mom had selected for me to wear the night of the Valentine's Day Ball.

It seemed laughable now, and yet the ball was still set to go ahead, as far as I was aware. I took the tiara from Emma's hands and ran it through my fingers.

"Here," Emma said, taking the tiara back and placing it on my head.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I was no longer a little girl playing dress-up. I was the future queen of Atlantice, and I had a job to do.

I just wasn't sure I had it in me to do it.

Emma smiled at my reflection.

"I don't know," I said softly.

She pulled me into a hug. "One day, you will be. I just hope it's sooner rather than later."

We were no longer mistress and maid. Somewhere along the line, we'd become friends.

8TH FEBRUARY

After spending the evening debating Emma's words and having a very long talk with John, the chief advisor, who tried everything to get me to go to where my parents were, I was no closer to knowing what to do.

On the one hand, I knew Emma was right. On the other hand, I didn't feel as though I could accomplish what my own father had not. It was all well and good, Emma telling me I was in a unique position, but she wasn't the one who had to stand up in front of a group of people who would see me as a traitor. The more I thought about it, the more my anxiety kicked in.

After a fitful night's sleep, I decided to go and see Fish to talk it through with him… or to escape my responsibilities. One or the other.

After traversing the rickety walkway through the secret tunnel, my hand firmly on the banister, I came out along the shore. I sat on a rock and waited for him.

I slid the avocado and olive sandwich I'd brought into my mouth. The waves crashed against the rocks, splashing tiny droplets of cold water on my feet and shins.

The peaceful sound supplanted the turmoil both above and below the sea as I concentrated on enjoying my scrumptious sandwich and not letting my mind wander to the job Emma had suggested I do.

In the distance, a red tail broke the shades of blue between the sky and sea.

True to his word, Fish appeared in less than ten minutes from me reaching the shore.

I finished my sandwich and quickly placed everything I'd brought with me on the rocks. I retied my bathing suit straps to avoid a wardrobe malfunction in the water and turned to face the sea.

Splash, splash.

Diving until my fingers skimmed the sandy bottom, I pumped my arms and legs faster in his direction. A few feet out from the pier, he hovered with arms wide open. I grinned and pushed my arms and legs even faster until he engulfed my body with his embrace.

The feeling of being protected and safe in his presence caused my heart to swell with emotion. He held me tight, his tail propelling us out to the open ocean and away from the guards that patrolled the beach. The water swooshed past us. Seconds later, we broke the ocean's surface. The world spun before we plunged back into the water.

Once we reached the depths, he kissed me. I surrendered to the kiss, and all my problems melted away. It was easy to get lost in him when there was no one around, no one to bother us.

"How are you, Princess?" he asked later after we swam up to the surface. "I was worried."

"Perfect now that I'm here in your arms, protected from the world. How about you?"

"Same." His dimples appeared, and his fingers smoothed my hair. "What do you want to do today? I'm all yours."

My toes curled in the water, and I took several deep breaths in a feeble attempt to control my heart.

I stared out into the vastness and spotted one of our navy ships a couple of hundred yards away. It wouldn't be long before they spotted us. We were probably the reason they were out here in the first place. "One of the caves? Secluded from everyone?"

"Sure thing."

Once we reached the bottom, we headed away from the pier. Away from the madness that had disrupted my world in just a matter of days.

The sunlight touched the tall seagrass as it swayed back and forth with the mild current. We bypassed the coral reefs I had already explored and the ones that led to the entrance to his kingdom. He rotated his body and pointed to a bluefin tuna swimming beyond a new reef, silently questioning.

I froze, ogling him as he used only his tail to propel himself forward. With one hand, he captured the seven-foot tuna and headed to a sharp rock. In one swoop, using the rock as a knife, he filleted the fish.

Seconds later, he motioned for me to follow him. We surfaced into a cave I'd not seen before. Gold and silver covered the cave floor almost up to the ceiling. The piles of treasure didn't leave any space to walk on.

I whispered, "Is this a pirate's cave?"

He sheepishly grinned. "Yes, but don't worry, it hasn't been used for years. We think they forgot how to get here or all the pirates on that ship died without leaving a map." He shrugged. "It's safe." He handed me a piece of the tuna.

"I'm surprised none of the merpeople have emptied it out." I bit into the tuna.

"We don't need these material things as humans do."

His simple answer reminded me of the problems in both kingdoms and the reason I wanted to talk to him.

"My maid… friend, Emma, wants me to give a speech in Antla. She thinks I can stop the riots, but I can't do it."

"Why not?" he questioned, moving a wooden chest to one side so I could sit down.

I shrugged. "My father has done nothing but give speeches, and they've not helped at all. If they wouldn't listen to the king, why would they listen to me? I just want to escape from all of it."

"Isn't this your escape?" He handed me another piece of the fish flesh.

"Yes, but it's so temporary. I want to leave everything behind forever."

I hated saying it, but that was the mood I was in.

"Wouldn't you miss your parents, your life in the palace? Your comforts? You'd no longer have a palace with guards patrolling the area, so you'd always have to look over your shoulder. It's not as easy as you think."

"You're right." I agreed with a sigh. "I would miss everyone, but I would gain freedom. Complete freedom from royal protocol, from friends turning on me, from people who hate me. I'd love to find a place with no other people and be free to make my own decisions."

With a neutral expression, he said, "The excitement would wear off in a few days. Being alone isn't all it's cracked up to be."

His eyes lowered, and he seemed to close himself off. I wondered if he was speaking from experience.

“I wasn’t thinking about being alone. I was thinking of being with you.”

His eyes lit up, and he nodded. “It sounds idyllic,” he said, planting a kiss firmly on my lips and handing me more of the fish.

I rested my head on my hand with my elbow propped on a free space on the rocky floor. “No more, thanks. The rest is yours.” I watched him devour the fish. “I know it would be a lot of work, but maybe that’s what I need. I’ve spent my whole life doing what I was told and playing the part of the obedient princess. Maybe it’s time to just be me.”

He cocked his head. “You really think running away is the answer?”

“I don’t know, but hiding in a cave of treasure isn’t it, either. And although Emma means well, I think she exaggerates my abilities. My father is the king and ruler of Atlantice, and it’s his job to stop the riots, not mine.”

He gazed into my eyes. “If that’s what you really want. I have nothing to stay here for.”

I stood up, too eager to sit still. “You agree, then?” My voice croaked from excitement. I’d been half-joking, using him as a sounding board, but now that he wanted to come with me, I realized I’d never wanted anything more. I would come home at some point to let my parents know I was alright, but in the meantime, I’d carve out my own life away from the responsibilities of being a princess.

“Thank you,” I whispered, bending slowly over to kiss him. In the shimmering light of the gold treasure, sparkles danced across his face, moving with the motion of the ocean that lapped the cave floor beneath us. His lips found mine, and I closed my eyes, kissing softly at first and then with dizzying intensity that sent the world spinning around us, locking the pair of us in our own little world and bringing me, quite literally, to my knees.

We should have spent the day planning our escape, but for a large part of it, our mouths were being put to better use than mere talking. Eventually, the tide pushed us further into the cave, and we had to either move or fall into the water. As I was already breathless from kissing him, I decided to move back. I created a path through the trinkets, on which Fish crawled awkwardly before settling himself on the sand next to me.

We did make plans then. I couldn't run away with only a bathing suit to wear. It was okay for Fish to be naked, all his people were, but I wasn't quite ready to abandon my modesty just yet. I'd spent years being lectured about the right way to dress, but no matter how much I wanted to throw caution to the wind, and truly be free, shyness dictated otherwise. I would have to go back to the palace at some point to pick up some things.

"I'll really miss my mother," I said, thinking about all the times she'd lectured me on proper attire. There was a sweet irony to it, really. "I wonder why my mother transformed into a mermaid now," I mused aloud. "All my life, she's had legs and all of a sudden, boom, she's a mermaid. She had no control over the sudden transformation."

He glanced at me. "Do you have any inkling what caused it? Did something happen beforehand?"

I shook my head. "I can't think of anything. When she and I talked, there didn't seem to be anything specific that triggered it. She'd been moody for a few weeks, which wasn't like her, but I'm attributing that to the pain. Her feet had begun to hurt. I remember wondering if she was unwell. I guess it had been going on for a month, maybe two, before she changed completely back to how she used to be."

"Was she in a large area of water when she changed?"

I shook my head. "No, she was on land the entire time beforehand. She placed her legs near the water when the transformation happened. I got the feeling that she'd been turning into a mermaid and back again for a few weeks, but by the time I discovered it, she couldn't change back."

"I wonder if it has something to do with her avoiding sea trips."

He knew a lot about my family!

"That was never her," I said. "She always wanted to ride in the ships to the mainland, but my dad insisted she fly. He never wanted her to be near water. That's why he installed our indoor pool. He managed to create a smaller version of the sea so she wouldn't miss it." I gave him a half-hearted smile. "But despite the pool, she still missed the sea."

"Hmm, so it's not as though seawater fell on her, and she transformed?"

I hesitated, remembering everything she said before I witnessed her transformation. Nothing solid came to mind, and I shook my head. "That last time, maybe, but I've seen her in the pool hundreds of times over the years, and I can assure you, I'd have noticed if she had a tail."

His long fingers rubbed his chin. “Rules out water triggering the change. But there must be a reason why it happened. Some trigger point.”

“That’s my thought exactly, but I don’t know. I don’t even know where she is to ask her. When I was at the palace, the guards told me that my parents were safe, but they refused to tell me where they were hiding.” I thought for a few minutes about writing her a note and asking one of the guards to give it to her, but then something else popped into my mind. “My mom kept a diary. If we find her diary, then maybe it’ll say if she suspected why she turned. It’ll be much faster than writing and having to wait for a response.”

He reached for my hand. “Maybe this isn’t the right time to escape?” His thumb rubbed the back of my hand. “If something happened to change your mom, maybe we should find out what. There’s been a lot of weird stuff happening over the last couple of months, and I wonder if it's somehow connected. The sea currents are changing. The sea is much more volatile than usual. All the merfolk have noticed.”

“The land people have noticed too. It’s been in the papers.” I hesitated for a second. “Do you really think we should investigate why she transformed instead?”

“It may not be what you want, but it may be what you need… And,” he cleared his throat, “it may provide clues that tell us if there’s a chance for you to transform.” His lips pulled tight.

My face might have blanched because his right hand reached out and landed on my forehead before it cupped my chin.

“Are you okay?” He lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. “I didn’t mean to scare you, but…”

I gaped at him. I had never thought that if she transformed, then maybe I could. Although having half her genes made it a distinct possibility.

I squeezed his hand and tried not to let panic envelop me. I’d pretty much been living as a mermaid for the past few days. Maybe having a tail would make things easier all around. And yet, however much I‘d learned to love the ocean, and despite the fact I could breathe underwater, I didn’t feel like a mermaid. I couldn’t keep warm in the frosty ocean without Fish, and he instinctively knew how to weave through the waves in a way I would never be able to match, mermaid or not.

I sighed at the weird way in which my life had changed in such a short period of time. The irony that I might grow a tail and turn into a mermaid

after so many years being active in the AML wasn't lost on me.

The journey back to the waterlogged tunnel was quicker than I had expected. We didn't breach the surface the whole time for fear of being spotted, but I didn't need to go above water to know there was a storm coming. Another one. Fish was right. We'd had more storms than usual this winter. The sea was much darker than usual, too, which made swimming harder. Thankfully, I had Fish to propel me through; otherwise, I'd never get back. Some mermaid I'd be!

The tunnel was as dark as it always had been, but thanks to the thunder clouds outside, it was barely darker than the open ocean. Fish knew exactly how far to travel, and when he stopped, I found we were at the steps next to the blue door.

"I should be back in about thirty minutes or so," I said, jumping out of the water into the drafty tunnels. "Don't venture off too far if you decide to explore."

"I won't." He grinned.

I returned his grin and slipped through the door.

Once in my room, I showered the saltwater off and changed into a clean bathing suit. Wrapping a robe around myself to keep warm, I sneaked to my parents' room. Usually, there would be a guard on duty outside, but with my parents away, most of the guards were assigned to the beach area and outside.

My mother wasn't the type to keep a secret diary. At least, I didn't think she was. Her diaries were more like journals chronicling her life as the queen of Atlantice. I always thought that one day, she was planning to pull the best passages from them and have them published. I ran straight to her bookshelf, where leather-bound volumes told the story of her life since her early days in the palace.

Grabbing one of the books from the middle, I opened it to the first page and noted the date, January 1, from about ten years ago.

I flipped to the middle of the book, and memories crashed back as I recalled the scene she mentioned.

She had written about the time I'd learned how to jump rope. She'd captured my clothes, the way I was so uncoordinated that it took me hours to learn. I closed my eyes and our garden with the roses climbing up the trellis wavered in front of me.

Happy memories mingled with the present as I flicked through the book of my tenth year.

I thumbed to the back. The last entry was from December 31 of that same year.

I placed it in a bag I'd found in my room and pulled out the diary from this year. Without reading it, I placed it in the bag with the other one. I was about to leave it at that when I realized that my mother's transformation might have happened sooner.

The other books would help me figure out when this thing actually began. I pulled them all from the shelf and heaped them into the bag, then hoisted the lot over my shoulder. The walk down through the palace was much harder than the walk up had been, what with the weight of the bag. But if I wanted to find out what caused this mess, I needed to dig deep, and my mother's journals were all I had to go on.

"Having fun while I do all the work?" I laughed as Fish swam figure eights in the shallow water.

"I have to practice my moves to keep you interested." He chuckled and waggled his eyebrows. "Did you find the diary?" He spread his arms wide in a lazy stroke that pushed him toward the edge.

Sitting down and dipping my feet into the water, I set the bag down. "I found a whole heap of them." The low light was not bright enough to read, so I placed my bag in a waterproof mailbag the palace staff used to give the mail to the mail-dolphins and splashed down into the water beside Fish. His touch warmed me immediately, and, not for the first time, I was glad I had him by my side.

We swam through the tunnels and to the next cove where we would be sheltered from the view of the palace. As we swam around the corner, a flash of thunder lit the sky, and the first spatters of rain began to fall. I didn't mind getting wet—I was already soaked to the skin from swimming and had been for days—but the rain was somehow colder than the ocean, almost sleet, and we couldn't read anything if the books got drenched.

"There's a cave over there," Fish said, pointing out a gap in the rocks.

We'd just made it to the entrance when a crack of thunder pealed through the sky.

Inside the cave was cozy and warm compared to outside, and though the sky was rapidly darkening, it was slightly brighter here than in the tunnel beneath the palace.

I let out a yawn as we came to rest on a soft sandy bed.

“Maybe we should check the diaries tomorrow,” Fish commented, taking the bag from me and laying it down beside him. I snuggled up to his naked chest for warmth as the storm battered the rocks, and the wind howled outside.

9TH FEBRUARY

A gentle breeze lifted a tendril of hair that tickled my face. I reached up to push it back, waking Fish from his peaceful slumber in the process.

His long, dark eyelashes fluttered. Turning my body onto my stomach, I watched him as he came to. His eyes opened a slit, and he threw a lazy grin my way, sending tingles down my spine. He really was a masterpiece of beauty, with his long hair spread out behind him. I kissed him lightly on the lips, eliciting another grin from him, and then skipped to the entrance of the cave to rinse the sand from me.

Silently, I scooped up water and rinsed my face, tasting the salt on my lips. Using my fingers, I braided my hair and used a hair tie I kept on my wrist to fasten the end.

The weather had cleared during the night, leaving a fresh morning and cloudless sky. I turned back to Fish to find him reading my mother's journal.

I stretched my arms and cleared my throat, he didn't respond.

He continued reading, oblivious to me.

"Morning?"

So much was his absorption in my mother's words that he didn't even look up.

I inched my way toward him, observing him as he read with his forehead creased from lifted eyebrows.

"Couldn't wait to dig into my mom's diary, huh?" I said, sitting next to him.

He jolted, and the book dropped onto the sand. "How did you sleep?"

“Like a baby.” I winked. “Which one are you reading?”

“There are twenty books here,” he exclaimed, holding one of them up. “Each book has three hundred and sixty-five entries, so I figured we’d better get started.” He sheepishly grinned. “I’m learning so much about your life.”

The corners of my mouth quirked up, but inside I trembled from not knowing what my mother wrote.

“I’m not sure about you reading my mom’s diaries,” I laughed. “Should I worry about you prying into my life with such intensity? My mom could have written anything about me. Even the embarrassing stuff. Actually, knowing her, she totally wrote embarrassing stuff.” I reached for the book in his hand, but he pulled it out of my reach with a grin.

He gave me a side-glance. “I like reading her words, especially when they provide snippets of your young life. I can imagine you as a child getting into these scrapes.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to keep the tone light, but my insides churned at how my whole life was laid out before him with every embarrassing detail written in black and white. If it had been anyone else, I would have insisted on reading the diaries myself, but there was something about him that made opening up to him exciting… and more than a little scary.

“After skimming a couple of the diaries from when you were young, I finally found the first one. The one where your mom explains how she fell in love and how she lost her tail to acquire her legs.”

“It’s all there?” A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of what I was about to discover. My mother had mentioned briefly that she’d fallen in love with my father after saving him from a shipwreck, and that she’d asked a sea witch to swap her tail for legs, but she’d been hazy on the details and remained tight-lipped when I’d questioned her further.

I sat cross-legged beside him as he flicked back to the very beginning of the first book.

“This one starts before you were born,” he said, pulling himself into a comfortable position. “Your mother started writing this when she first came to the palace, but she begins by writing a bit about her life under the sea and how she came to the palace in the first place.”

A ripple of excitement came over me. I’d never heard the full story, and I’d certainly not heard about her life before she came to the palace.

“She starts off by saying that she first fell in love with your father as a child. A statue of him when he was a young prince was apparently erected near the coast at the other side of Antla to commemorate his sixteenth birthday.”

“I know that statue!” I gasped. “He’s looking out to sea in it because he wanted to be in the navy. He got his wish not long after the statue went up. He was a naval officer for years before his father died and he became king.”

“Yeah. I know the statue too. I can’t imagine anyone falling in love with it, but there you go.”

I laughed as he pulled a face. Yeah, it was weird, but my mother might have led a life like mine, one of loneliness. Wasn’t falling for a statue less weird than joining an anti-merfolk league? It was less destructive, anyway.

“She wrote that she made a flower garland and hung it around the neck of the statue.” He raised his eyebrows at me.

“Just keep reading,” I chided him. “What happens next?”

“Well, this went on for some time although she didn’t say how long exactly. She does say that her six sisters made fun of her for doing it.”

I sat up straight. “Six sisters? I have six aunts out there somewhere?”

Fish shrugged. “I guess so.”

I had a whole family under the water that I’d never met. And my mother had never mentioned them to me, not once. “How could she leave her whole family and never talk about them?”

Just the thought of it broke my heart. I’d yearned for sisters when I was a child. I’d practically begged my mother for a little sister. Or even a brother, but my mother always told me I was perfect, and she would never be able to beat perfection. It was cute, but it had never consoled me. I was lonely. I didn’t want perfection. I wanted someone to play with.

“I don’t think she left on good terms,” Fish said. “It seems like they teased her a lot as she was the youngest. I’m not surprised she never mentioned them.”

“So she fell in love with my dad’s statue. Then what?”

“You’re going to love this,” he said, shifting position and changing the book from one hand to the other. “As you said, your dad loved to sail. She wrote two whole pages about the first time she saw him in real life. It was the middle of summer… Hang on, I’ll read this part out.” He put a slight inflection in his voice, heightening the tone to sound like what he thought

my mother sounded like. It would have been off-putting, but as I was so desperate to hear what he had to say, I let it go.

"It was a beautiful summer day," he read aloud. "My sisters had been royal jerks to me all morning, so I decided to head to the surface to see the sun. I'd always preferred the light to the dark. I hadn't expected to see him, the man that would become the love of my life. Had I known, I would have done something, although I do not know what. Mermaids have no access to the items land ladies take for granted. No makeup, no hairbrushes, and none of the beautiful clothes I'm now so grateful for. I only had my charms, and as a mere sixteen-year-old, they were pretty thin on the ground. I still remember that moment as though it was yesterday. His windswept hair was nothing like the perfect style on the statue, but I recognized him immediately. My heart was pounding so quickly that I almost forgot how to swim. He sailed past me in his boat, so intent on his destination that he didn't even notice me peeking out of the water. Not that it was a bad thing. My hair was messy and tangled with seaweed. I was torn between following him and risking him seeing me looking like the gauche adolescent I was or letting him go and hoping he'd come back when I was slightly less messy."

Fish flicked his own hair in an attempt to be my mother.

I laughed. "Stop it. Keep going with the story. Did she follow him?"

Fish nodded. "Apparently, she did. Not only that day, but many others. Once she knew his route, she waited patiently for him and followed him every day for a year."

"Did he see her?"

"She says not," Fish replied. "She was too nervous to ever speak to him. I guess that's because she was a mermaid, and he was a land dweller."

I couldn't imagine being so infatuated with someone that I'd follow him for a year without making my presence known. It must have been so hard on her, and all the while, my father had no clue.

"Be prepared," he continued, "because it gets better. One day, lightning struck your dad's boat, and it capsized, rendering your father unconscious in the process. Your mother saved him and brought him to land, but she was too scared to let him see her as a mermaid. She made sure he was breathing and left him on the shore to wake on his own."

I sighed at the thought of it. Knowing how it had ended made it all the more romantic.

“She’d heard of a sea witch with supernatural powers, so she swam for hours to a dangerous part of the sea, far away from the kingdom, and asked the witch to replace her tail with human legs.”

I couldn’t imagine how much she loved my father to do such a thing. “Why would she do that?”

Fish shrugged. “Why do we do what we do? She loved him so much that she wanted to be able to meet with him on land. Our desires can drive us to stupidity.” He rested the book on his lap. “I never told you this, but your mother wasn’t the only one. The day we first talked might have been the first time you saw me, but it wasn’t the first time I saw you. It took me weeks to build up the courage to talk to you.”

Without thinking, my fingers slipped under his hand, and I squeezed it. “I’m glad you did,” I whispered. The urge to kiss him right there and then was immense.

He pulled the book up to carry on reading, but my heart was insistent and my lips ready for him.

Positioning myself between him and the journal, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his, slowly this time. I wanted to remember every part of it, the feel of his lips upon mine, the salty taste of him, the way my heart beat like the pounding of the waves upon the shore. My fingers found his hair, gripped it, and pulled, bringing him closer still until our bodies touched, melting into each other. He rolled me over, and a slight thump told me the book had fallen into the sand.

His kiss took my breath away, and the weight of him on top of me brought about deep desires I’d never known, feelings of urgency, of closeness, and of never letting go.

I probably would have stayed like that forever, but a rogue wave engulfed us, taking the journal back with it as it finished its journey upwards and started back to the sea.

“The book!” I screamed.

Fish leapt up and caught the diary quickly before it was lost to the ocean. He shook it, letting water drip all over me.

“I think we should take a break while this dries out,” he said, placing it on a dry rock in the sun. “I don’t think the water has damaged it too much. The ink hasn’t run. I’m starving. Do you want me to find us something for breakfast?”

I nodded, the taste of salt—of him—still on my lips.

“Oysters would be good,” I replied with a nod.

He leaned in and placed a single peck on my forehead. “I’ll be back with lots of oysters. Maybe while I’m out, you can put the books in chronological order so it’s easier for us to select the time frame we’re looking for.”

Responding to his gentle kiss, the corners of my mouth quirked up, and I said, “Sure.”

“I won’t be long.”

I’d been so caught up in my mother’s history that I’d completely forgotten the reason I’d taken the journals in the first place. I would have to read through them to find out why the sea witch's spell had reversed, but I needed to hear the rest of my parents’ story first.

Figuring out the order of the books was a much simpler task than I had anticipated. On the very first page of each journal, she’d written the year in big writing. I piled the journals up neatly and waited for Fish to return.

I didn’t have to wait for very long. Within ten minutes, he came back with an armful of oysters. With his bare hands, he pried open four and handed them to me.

“What about your breakfast?” I asked as he placed the rest next to me.

He sheepishly grinned. “This is my dessert. I sorta had a bluefin tuna.”

The morning sun caught the side of his face, making the droplets of water still clinging to his hair glisten. As I ate, he sat next to me, doing nothing but watching me. Small tingles ran through my veins as, once again, I felt exposed to him in a way I never had with anyone before.

“Why don’t you go and see if that journal is still legible,” I said when I could stand it no longer. If he’d been eating, too, it would have been fine, but to have him watch me as I tipped oyster after oyster down my throat left me feeling almost naked.

“Where did we get up to?” he asked, picking the book up from the rock and prying the damp pages apart.

We’d gotten to the part that had made him admit he’d been watching me for a while before speaking to me, which in turn had made me want to kiss him, but I skipped past that. “Find the bit about the sea witch,” I said, throwing the empty oyster shells back into the ocean.

Fish nodded and found his place. “The Sea Witch provided her with the legs, but it caused her an excruciating amount of pain when she walked.

She wrote that it felt like the points of a sword jabbed the soles of her feet every time she stepped on them."

I gasped. "My mom had that same pain before she turned back into a mermaid. The guards had to help her walk."

Fish nodded. "She wrote that the Sea Witch warned her, but that she'd rather have the pain than not be able to win your dad's love."

"I can't believe she'd do that."

"Ah, well, there was another young lady who liked your dad." He cleared his throat. "And this young lady was not only beautiful but a princess. When your mom witnessed them together, her heart almost broke, which is when she started asking around about transforming herself."

I shook my head. She'd never mentioned any of this. I knew the royal families of all the kingdoms. Many of them attended the balls that my mother put on every year at Valentine's Day. Could one of them have been a rival for my father's affection? I wondered which princess it was and if I'd met her.

"Yes, and she wrote, 'My love for Prince Ermias is a thousand times greater than any pain I may suffer. I'd rather die than not be with him.' And she told the Sea Witch as much when she begged her for the legs. She really loved him, huh?"

I nodded. "She still does. It sounds weird when you read it out like that, but their love has lasted all this time. It's sweet, really. She went through so much for him."

"The rest of the entry is how she met your father with her human legs and how she danced with him while being in pain."

"My mother loved him so much that she underwent all that suffering and left her family for him. What a sacrifice. Now it makes sense why my dad never wanted her in the water. It's the one disagreement they always had when they needed to travel to the mainland. My mom always lost."

"Love will make us do crazy things." He leaned his head back, his gorgeous wavy hair fanned out on the sand behind him.

"The Sea Witch did this to her. Maybe she knows how to help my mother. Does the journal say where the witch lives?"

"Unfortunately, there's nothing else about the process or how the Sea Witch did it. She may be dangerous."

“Not all witches are dangerous,” I pointed out. “Look at Enchantia. It’s full of them, and most are really nice people. Queen Snow is lovely!”

He stared at me for a minute, his face contorting as if he tasted bad seafood. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“The Sea Witch gave my mom legs when she asked for them,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but she also made them painful. Who knows how long the pain lasted? We’ve only just started on the first book. Maybe the pain went on for years. What if your mother’s feet always hurt?”

“They didn’t!” I said a little too quickly. The thought horrified me. “She only started complaining of pain before her tail came back. One or two days at the most. She was in a weird mood for a few weeks before that, but at Christmas, she danced with my father for hours with a smile on her face. She wasn’t faking. She was so happy. I doubt she would have been able to do that if her feet were killing her.”

Fish shrugged as though he wasn’t convinced. “You want to go find her, don’t you?”

I thought of our plan of running away together. Before I’d read my mother’s journals, it had been my only wish, but my mother had sacrificed so much to be with my father. Even though she’d been through all that, she was back to where she started with a tail instead of legs—and she was being vilified for it.

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

10TH FEBRUARY

Planning to find a witch in the ocean, as big as it was, was not an easy feat. But with a bit of careful reading, plus Fish's extensive knowledge of the ocean, we pinpointed a section of the ocean where we thought she might be. My mother had mentioned a part of the sea near Atlantice's unofficial borders with Floris, and Fish had worked out the rest with his knowledge of that particular area, which was very little. It was a fool's errand, and we were unlikely to find her, but if I did, maybe I could make my mother human again, and the mess happening in Atlantice would go away.

Or at least, it would lessen for my parents. If my mom could walk again, she would be able to return to the palace, and my father would be able to run the kingdom instead of being forced into hiding.

By the time Fish had made his mind up yesterday about the best place to look, the sun had already been high in the sky. We didn't want to be caught so far out at sea after dark, so we'd decided to get a good night's sleep and set off in the early morning instead.

Which is why I'd come back to the palace, and I was once again sneaking around my own home. I needed to pack some things, and I didn't particularly want to tell anyone why. My mother's history was hers to share, not mine, and I didn't want to be put in a position where I'd have to lie about where I was going.

After packing a number of bathing suits into a bag and filling the rest with packaged food, I slipped my knife into the side pocket and headed back to meet Fish in the secret tunnel. As my parents were away, the staff presence in the palace was pretty thin, and I managed to gather everything

I needed and get back without being caught. We'd left the books in the cave, knowing they'd be safe there as no one could get to it from the land. I'd put them right at the back, high up on a rock, and weighed them down with a heavy stone in case a storm blew in and pushed the tide higher than it usually went.

Fish smiled sheepishly as I slipped through the door. "I'm not a hundred percent sure exactly where we need to go," he admitted.

I furrowed my brow as I slid into the water beside him. "Yesterday, you said you thought you knew where my mother was talking about."

He rubbed the back of his neck as his other hand moved lazily along the water's surface. "Yeah, I thought I did, but I want to make sure. I don't want to drag us on a wild goose chase. It won't take long. We can head back to the mer-city, and I'll ask around, just to confirm."

Blinking a couple of times, my voice creaked as I asked, "You want me to go back to the mer-city? Great. Excellent. Seaweed hanging in trees, fantastic!"

"What?" Fish asked, confusion clouding his features.

I covered my mouth to avoid spitting at him as I chortled. "You haven't heard of that expression? And you, a merman. I thought it came from your people."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

It took a couple of breaths to ease off from my mirth. "Take the first letter of each word and spell it out." I repeated the phrase but emphasized the first letter of each word, using my finger to spell out the words for him. "Seaweed. Hanging. In. Trees."

His eyes widened before he chuckled. "Shit, indeed. I promise it won't take long."

I pulled the bag over my shoulder and took his hand. Just before we submerged into the water, I heard him mumbling "seaweed in trees" and following it with a laugh.

A rush of emotions flooded me as I remembered how the mermaids had treated me. Amidst the array of colors, my own color faded as the blood drained from my face and limbs. I was hated as much under the sea as my mother was on land. A trip to the mer-city would only draw attention to us, and then everyone would know where we were going. I didn't want everyone to know. As we exited the tunnel and daylight hit my eyes, the fear of heading back to the mer-city became too much.

I hesitated, pulling back on Fish's arm.

When he glanced over his shoulder, I shook my head so emphatically that my hair drifted in front of my face. I pointed up and continued my ascent to the surface.

As he breached the surface next to me, his eyes adopted a look of concern. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Shaking my head and waving my hands side to side, I shouted, "I'm not going back there. The merfolk hate me."

He lifted my chin, and our gazes met. "They don't hate you, they are just wary. Why don't we head to the pirate's treasure cave? You can wait there, and I'll find out where the Sea Witch resides. I'll come back as soon as I'm done."

I closed my eyes. "How long?"

"I'll be as quick as I can. I've heard rumors of the witch before, so she is known to the people there."

He took me to the cave and left me to wait. Without him, my temperature plummeted rapidly. It was so strange how he kept me so warm. I pulled a sweater from the bag and pulled it over my head.

While he was gone, I took a granola bar from my bag and chowed down on it. I was getting pretty sick of eating fish, though I'd never tell Fish that. It was all he ate. After taking a couple of swigs of juice I'd brought with me, I wandered around the cave. So much treasure hidden away where no one could find it. It seemed an awful waste, and yet, I had no desire to steal any of it. It was beautiful, but no more so than the treasures the palace already held. I might have been tempted to take a necklace or ring, but anything I took would only weigh us down, and I had no use for trinkets.

Without my watch, I had no way of knowing how long Fish took, but it was long enough for me to worry that he might want to leave our trip for another day. I didn't want to wait anymore. This had gone on long enough.

Eventually, though, he came back. His expression was enough for me to know that he'd found out the information we needed. I pulled the sweater off and bundled it back into my bag along with the empty granola bar wrapper.

"Let's go," he said, holding his hand out to me. I took it without question.

Less than a week ago, doing much more than dipping my toes into the ocean would have put me into a cold sweat. Now, here I was, swimming out into the deepest part of the sea, and I was looking forward to the adventure.

The sun was out, and although it didn't make much difference to the temperature of the water, which was still icy cold, it gave the impression of summer. Sharing Fish's body heat helped cement the impression.

I still didn't know how that worked. He only had to touch me with the tips of his fingers to warm my entire body. I was glad of it. Our friendship, or whatever it was, was only possible because of the weird magic. On my own, my body would succumb to the cold, and I'd be dead in less than thirty minutes. It was a scary thought, and one I tried not to dwell on as the land behind us got smaller and smaller. Before the land was out of sight completely, Fish pulled me under, and we continued our journey below the surface.

We swam for hours, skimming the seabed—or, at least, Fish swam, and I let myself be pulled along by him. My swimming wasn't particularly strong yet, and I'd never have kept up with him if I was left to my own devices. With little to do, I watched the underwater world pass me by, marveling that there was a whole other world down here, one so different from my own.

Eventually, the beautiful reefs of coral of every color gave way to boring sand with the odd sea plant. The deeper we swam, the darker it got, and before long, the sun's rays barely penetrated the water, and I had to squint to see. My head filled with tension, making me feel dizzy until the pressure became unbearable. I yanked on Fish's hand and pointed upwards. We swam up slowly with him stopping every minute or so for a break. My desperation to breathe clean air made me struggle to get out of his grip, but he wouldn't let me go, and it seemed to take forever to reach the surface.

"What did you do that for?" I wheezed, pulling air into my lungs. Immediately, the headache subsided.

"I forgot for a second that you are human," he explained.

"What?"

"Merfolk can withstand immense pressure under the sea. Humans find it tough. You can go down quickly, but if we'd surfaced too quickly, it

could kill you. As soon as I saw your expression, I knew I had to get you to the surface. Your head hurt, didn't it?"

"It did. It's better now."

He nodded. "Next time we go down, I want you to hold your nose and blow to equalize the pressure. It will stop the headaches. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And when we resurface, we'll take it slowly."

I held my thumbs up, feeling foolish. I'd never thought about the water pressure. This time, when we traveled down, I did what he said. It worked, not that I had thought it wouldn't.

"Do you think the Sea Witch will hurt us?" I asked, suddenly feeling nervous now that we were so deep I could barely see. I honestly didn't believe she would, but I wanted to hear his voice next to me to reassure me that he was still by my side. He was still holding my hand, but it didn't feel like enough somehow.

"The person I spoke with said he didn't think she was dangerous. And while I didn't ask about her being mean or malicious, I don't think she is. We need to be careful and not ask her for anything. Apparently, she only barters for things she really wants, and she never accepts money as payment."

I wondered what she'd taken in payment for giving my mother legs.

We continued through fathoms dark and deep, slowing down to minimize bumping into a dying coral reef. Bereft of bright hues, this one contained various shades of grey tones.

I pulled closer to Fish, afraid of the sea creatures that might lurk around the corner.

"Princess, we're getting close. There will be another coral reef completely draped with the bones of dead sea creatures." He slowed his pace and pointed to the coral reef a hundred yards away. "I'm sure that's it."

I shuddered. "What? Is everything dead there?"

"From what I hear, yes, almost everything will be dead. Stay next to me when we meet her."

Like I was going to go elsewhere. I gripped his hand more tightly as we neared the decaying reef.

With nearly no light reaching this depth, I was having a hard time seeing exactly where we were headed, but my eyesight had strengthened

over the last week or so, allowing me to see enough. Enough to know, I wished I'd stayed at home, at least.

A dark shadow rose at our right, but when I looked, there was nothing there. We inched closer, and as we did, the water became noticeably colder. A cold that Fish's warmth couldn't penetrate. I was about to suggest we leave this for another day when a grey shape loomed over the coral in the distance.

Had I been on land, I'd have inhaled sharply, and it took everything I had not to open my mouth at the sight of her. Fish stopped and swam slightly in front of me.

"Greetings! We want to speak with the Sea Witch. We've been told she lives in these waters."

As she moved toward us out of the murk, her figure took shape. I was surprised to see that she wasn't a mermaid, but something else entirely. A creature I'd never heard about. While her top half was that of a beautiful woman with long flowing hair, her tail was more akin to that of a seahorse than a fish. Her striking purple tail curled around at the end into a swirl, and I was sure that it would be rather striking if there was more light.

"I'm known as the Sea Witch in these waters." She spoke with a clear and pleasant voice, which put me at ease. I'd been expecting something horrific, especially after passing through the dead reef, but as she came closer I saw a kindly face set in a smile. She lowered her head and inspected us. "How may I help you? Is there something you wish to barter? Something in the bag, perhaps?"

She swam to us and then whipped around me, fingering the bag. As I turned my head to look at her, she arched her brow.

"There's nothing in there beyond some old clothes and a bit of food," I said.

"We are here because we were hoping you'd be able to answer some questions for us," Fish said.

With a sly smile, she asked, "What are the questions you desire me to answer, handsome merman?"

Handsome merman?

"Do you remember a young mermaid you helped get legs about nineteen, twenty years ago?" I replied for him, making sure I was between them. She could keep her mitts to herself if she thought Fish was on offer.

The Sea Witch glided around me, her tail curling and uncurling slowly while her fins beat faster than a hummingbird's wings. "Ah, the little mermaid from the kingdom far away. You know her?" She narrowed her eyes, light emerald dotted with black specks, beautiful with a hint of secrecy behind them.

"You remember her?" Fish asked with a hitch in his voice.

Her eyes fixated on his. "Of course, I remember everyone I help. As a witch I have a lot of power to help those without any." She grinned. "You can't imagine how much pleasure it gives me to grant people their wishes, especially those who are good. And she was one of those people..." She looked to the sea behind us as though she was thinking back. "Maybe I can help you?" She pointed her long, thin fingers at Fish. "Whatever your heart desires, I can grant for a lifetime."

He bowed, lowering his eyes. "I will definitely keep that in mind, but right now, I want to know about her transformation and the forever part."

"Anything your heart desires," she repeated breathily, getting close to him. "What is it you desire?"

The way she gazed at him made me nervous, almost as though she was casting a spell on him. I desired for her to get out of his face, but I could hardly say that.

"Can you tell us what happened to the girl you helped?" Fish asked.

"Ah, yes," she said, swimming away a little. "Sometimes, my mind wanders. But that sweet child was so special, one of a kind. I could never forget her. She had so much love for that prince." She sighed. "She so desperately wanted human legs that she would do anything for them." Shaking her head, her cobalt blue and emerald hair fanned until it gently landed on her shoulders.

"Her tail is back," Fish said. "After all these years, the spell reversed. Did you have something to do with that?"

The witch ran her index finger across her lower lip. "That's odd. The spell should've lasted her entire life. It was one of my more powerful spells." She tapped her lips with the same finger. "You're sure she lost her legs and regained her tail?"

"I actually saw her transformation," I said. "One minute, she had human legs, and the next, she had a tail." I shrugged. "We can't figure it out. We thought you would know, as you were the one to give her the legs."

“You saw it happen? You know her? I heard she went on to become the queen of the land.”

“She did become queen. She is my mother.”

On hearing this, the witch’s eyes widened briefly before going back to normal. She placed her hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry to hear your mother is having problems,” she said, playing with my hair. “Such a nice girl to come this far to help her. I notice you haven’t got a tail. Would you like one?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

A school of fish swam near us, heading in her direction, then quickly returned our way. I watched them move in one humongous circle.

“Hmm.” She studied me up and down. “You are not a mermaid, and yet, you swim underwater. Interesting… and strange.”

Fish swayed his tail impatiently. “Could your spell have worn off? It’s been twenty years.”

She waved her hands. “Oh, no. Once they’re transformed, they cannot return to their original state. It is permanent and irreversible. All my spells are.”

“Maybe she wished for her tail back. I know she missed the sea.”

“That could never happen,” replied the witch. “My spells are so powerful that neither the power of a person’s mind nor the passage of time can undo them. It’s funny, but I never expected...”

I waited for her to finish the sentence, but when she didn’t, I asked her. “Expected what?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said gaily. “I’m just intrigued by you. A half-human and half-mermaid,. and yet, you are neither of those things.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Pardon me. I don’t get many visitors, and I forget myself sometimes. Is there anything else I can help you both with?”

Fish bowed. “Thank you so much for assisting us. We appreciate you answering our questions. You’ve been most gracious and generous with your time.”

But she hadn’t helped us. She didn’t know why my mother transformed back any more than we did. According to her, it was impossible, and yet, I’d seen it with my own eyes. Maybe she wasn’t as powerful as she made herself out to be.

She beamed. “Won’t you stay and join me for a light supper, at least? You’ve come a long way. You must be hungry.”

He shook his head. “No. Thank you for the generous offer, but we have to return.”

She nodded, but her piercing eyes remained on mine. “It’s been a pleasure, and please don’t hesitate to return, my dear merman… and you with the beautiful golden-ringed eyes... Such stunning eyes.”

Fish pulled me away slowly after we’d said our goodbyes. The witch had been perfectly nice to us, and yet, our meeting left a sour taste in my mouth—and I wasn’t just talking about seawater. There was something odd about the way she looked at me. When we’d first shown up, she’d only had eyes for Fish, but the second I mentioned who I was, her attention fixated on me. And that thing she said. Neither mermaid nor human? Was she talking about me being half of both or something else entirely? When I’d called her out on it, she’d passed it off as her forgetting herself. What did that even mean?

Once I knew we were out of earshot, I spoke to Fish. “She’s hiding something. I don’t know what, but I think she is.”

He turned to face me. “I think you’re right, but there is nothing we can do about it.”

As we swam toward the light and away from the Sea Witch, I began to feel better about things. We’d not learned anything that would help my mother, but I wondered if I had worried too much about the witch. Now, in the light of day, the whole thing seemed silly.

And yet, I couldn’t shake off the feeling she knew more about me than I did.

11TH FEBRUARY

I awoke the next morning in the sea cave where we'd spent the previous night. A grey mist clung to the rocks, mirroring my own mood. I pulled myself up and headed over to my bag. Fish always kept me warm, but I craved the warm hug of my sweater. I'd been wearing bathing suits for days, and I was sick of it.

I pulled the sweater over my head, then grabbed another granola bar and bottle of water, and made my way back to where Fish was sleeping. He'd slept with his arm around my waist, but now that I'd moved away, it was splayed out on the sand. Stifling the urge to take it in mine, I ripped the packaging off the granola bar and swallowed it in two bites. Dinner last night had been raw fish again, and while Fish never seemed to get enough, I was thoroughly sick of it.

I didn't want to admit it, but I needed to go home. How could I have thought about running away only days before? It made me want to laugh. Out in the sea, I would have lived a life of bathing suits and cold fish for every meal. Meanwhile, I craved normalcy and a hot meal. I wanted a shower and to wear socks. All the things I'd taken for granted, I now wanted more than anything.

Most of all, I missed my parents. While they were hiding from threats of being killed, I was hiding away from everything. The kingdom was going to crap, and its leaders were nowhere to be seen.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to the people, it wasn't fair to my parents, and it wasn't fair to me.

I looked over at Fish, and my heart did a double beat. If he wasn't so inordinately beautiful, this wouldn't be so hard. If he was ordinary or

pedestrian in any way, or in any sense of the word, I wouldn't feel so conflicted, but he wasn't. He was special, and wonderful, and all the other words people used to describe the person they loved, none of which were quite enough.

And I did love him. I'd suspected it for some time, that my feelings were growing stronger, but it wasn't until the sea witch looked at him so intimately that I felt a sucker punch of jealousy to the chest. It wasn't as though she had even wanted him, per se. She had only wanted to barter, and yet the thought of her, or anyone, having him made me feel sick to my stomach.

I didn't belong with him in the sea, but I no longer belonged on land either. Like the Sea Witch had said, I was neither mermaid nor human, but somewhere in between. Someone that fit in nowhere.

I wanted to wake Fish to tell him I needed a break, but the thought scared me. I didn't want a break from him, merely the sea, but what if he didn't see it that way? If I could have taken him up on the land, I would have, but he wouldn't be able to go anywhere with his tail. Just like my mother and father had been, we were destined to be apart, and yet hadn't my mother broken her own destiny? She had until now, anyway.

Fish stirred, breaking me out of my thoughts. I swallowed, knowing what I was about to say would hurt him.

"Hey, you," he said lazily, turning in the sand, his eyes focusing on me.

"I need to go home. I'm sorry."

Tears welled in my eyes as I waited for the backlash. But there was none. He held his hand out to me. "I've been thinking the same thing," he said, pulling me into a hug.

As he wrapped his arms around me and the heat pounded through my body, I wished I could stay exactly where I was forever.

"You know where I am if you ever need me."

"I don't mean forever," I said in a rush.

He pulled me tighter. "I know you don't. You are a land dweller, and it's where you belong. I'd feel pretty weird being out of the sea for more than a few days."

"But doesn't that make you sad?" I asked. "You belong in the sea; I belong on land."

He turned me to face him. He was so close, I could feel his warm breath on my cheek, and when he looked at me, I could see forever.

“It doesn’t mean we don’t belong together,” he said, stroking his hand through my hair. “It just means we can’t be together all the time.”

“But I want us to be together all the time.” I sighed.

He sat up, pulling me with him. “I do, too, but I‘ve seen your reaction every time I give you raw fish.”

He pulled a face, making me laugh. “I look that bad, huh?”

“I can’t cook underwater, and any food I can get from the shops will inevitably be waterlogged. I can’t change that, but I can let you go home to eat every once in a while. I’ve got things to do anyway. I’ve neglected my own life.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” he said, pulling me toward him. He kissed me lightly on the lips. I closed my eyes and inhaled his salty scent. “Don’t apologize for giving me the best week of my life.”

My heart warmed to his words. I knew that the last couple of weeks had been amazing for me, but it was nice to hear he felt the same way.

“If only the merfolk liked me. Things might be different.”

My own prejudices against them had influenced how I treated them, which, in turn, led them to hate me.

A vicious cycle of my own doing.

I could have blamed it on Hannah, on her influence as my best friend, but at the end of the day, I was the one who had made the choice to mistreat them, to show them hate, not her. The AML may have influenced and misled me, but I hadn’t stopped to meet merpeople and find out the truth.

“If only the land folk liked us,” he countered.

“Ugh, you’re right. I just don’t know what to do to rectify things.”

“Beats me how we can bring both groups back to a semblance of civility.” He ran his fingers through his long tresses. “This whole situation seems to have been blown out of proportion, and it’s asinine. Both worlds are as bad as each other. It’s never been perfect, but in the last few months, things have become intolerable. I wish I knew what had changed so suddenly.”

“My mother turning into a mermaid?” I offered.

“I think that’s a symptom of the problem and not the cause of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Things have been different for a while. Way before your mother’s transformation.” He drew closer, leaning in real slow, and kissed me. “I’m so sorry that I can’t figure this all out. I wish I could.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes, and I could see how much this bothered him. As much as it did me.

I sighed and began to stand, but he pulled me back down to the sand before lifting my chin and gazing into my eyes. “Don’t allow what we’re going through to destroy who you are. I know it’s tough, but we’ll get through this.”

My fingers intertwined with his. “I hope you’re right.”

He shrugged. “We’ve been away a while. Maybe there’s been a breakthrough that we don’t know about. Your parents could be back in the palace waiting for you to come home.” His dimples appeared as he smiled.

I loved his optimism, but I knew he was wrong. I could feel it in my heart.

“I want to swim to my own kingdom and see what is happening there,” he continued. “It’s not just the land dwellers with the problem. The merfolk have developed a major attitude, too. You do what you need to on land, and I’ll work on the merfolk.”

Having a plan made me feel a little better about the situation and made me more determined to face my problems.

I gathered the books up and slotted them back into my bag in preparation for going home.

I remained silent on the short journey around the cove and into the tunnel that would take me home. What else was there to say? It felt like something was ending as I left him at the secret door to the palace, but he assured me he’d be back as soon as I needed him. I gave him a quick goodbye kiss and slipped through the door.

My room looked exactly the same as when I’d left it. Nothing had been moved, no new clothes had been laid on my bed, and the basket of cleaned shoes Emma had brought to me the last time I was home was still on the floor where she’d left it.

Strange. Where’s Emma?

After a quick shower, I slipped on a dress, loving the feel of the fabric after days of wearing a wet bathing suit. Pulling on a jacket over it, I headed toward the dining room.

My mouth dropped at the emptiness of the room. A fine layer of dust coated the dining table, and while the table was set, no one had eaten in the room in days.

Not one single item was out of place.

I rushed out of the room and sprinted toward the kitchen.

Empty.

The entire hallway was devoid of guards and staff.

Where did everyone go?

I pushed open the kitchen doors and stopped dead in my tracks. The room sparkled as if the staff had spent days cleaning it, but there was no one there.

I brought my hand up and rubbed the back of my neck.

I ambled to the main rooms on the first floor. But every room remained unoccupied. It was as if the entire palace was uninhabited.

What is going on?

Clink clank, clink clank. Silence. Clink clank, clink clank. Silence.

The loud noise sounded as if it came from the ballroom.

I pivoted on my toes and hurried to the source of the noise.

Emma hurried from the outside terrace doors, holding a step stool in one hand. She grinned at me. “You’re back. Thank goodness you’re back.” She placed the stool on the floor and curtsied.

“Emma, where is everyone?”

Clink clank, clink clank. Silence.

“And what is that noise?”

“Someone forgot to properly lock the window in the ballroom. The lock doesn’t automatically return to its place unless you force it to, so every time the wind blows, the metal hits both glass and metal. It’s the one on the top, so I was looking for the step stool to fix it.” She picked up the stool. “Care to help?”

“Sure.” I followed her to the windows.

She stopped and gently set the stool next to the window. I held it for her as she stepped on the first rung

As she fixed the lock, I took a look around the ballroom. It was decorated for the ball with beautiful sashes of purple and pink and tables and chairs laid out, waiting for party guests. A huge tank stood at the far end filled with water

“Why is the room decorated and what’s that tank for?”

Emma fixed the lock and stepped down. “Just in case your parents return, and we have the Valentine’s Day ball.” She smiled. “The queen sent word that they’re still hoping to be home by then. The tank is for her for when she returns. Repairs are still being done to the pool room.”

“You’ve heard from her? Is she all right? When did she say they were coming back?”

“She didn’t specify a date.” Emma sighed. “She just said she hoped this would all end soon. I think she wanted us to decorate the ballroom so she could remain hopeful about everything going back to normal. Her letter also had instructions to send all the palace staff home until further notice. A few of the guards are still here, although most are out in the towns dealing with the problems there. I elected to stay behind, as did a few others, but as you can see, the palace is mostly empty.”

I’d never heard the palace so quiet. With the normal everyday hustle and bustle of staff, advisors, and guests gone, the place seemed desolate.

“I don’t suppose she mentioned where they were staying, did she?”

Emma shrugged. “I didn’t read the message. I’m only relaying what was told to all the staff by the head palace advisor. He’s still here if you want to ask him.”

I nodded my head. I needed to see my parents to make sure they were okay. The head advisor had already told me that he’d organize safe passage for me to wherever they were.

“If you’ll forgive me, Your Highness, I don’t think you should go to them.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, furrowing my brow.

Emma tapped her feet on the floor and wrung her hands as she plucked up the courage to say what she had to say.

“You have the ability to stop the people from creating more havoc.”

I held my hand out to stop her from speaking.

“I can’t do it, Emma. If my father can’t make a difference, why should I be able to? I’m only back to see my parents. I need to talk to them.”

“You doubt your own abilities. One day you will be the queen of Atlantice, and you won’t be able to wait for your father to make a difference. It will be all on you. Do you want to lead a divided kingdom when your time comes, or do you want to heal the divide now while the rift is still young?”

Emma picked up the stepstool and hurried out, but she halted at the door and glanced over her shoulder. “It’s not always been this way, and you know it. Your father doesn’t know the AML, but you do. Your father doesn’t know the merfolk. You are the only one who knows both well enough to get them to listen. I guess you need to decide what kind of ruler you want to be.”

She left the room, and once again, the silence deafened me.

Her words impacted me in a way I had never thought they could. She was right. I’d spent so long figuring out how to run and hide when I should have been working on coming up with a solution.

I meandered around the room, touching the glass vases and silk chair coverings. I traced a couple of the names that had been embroidered with gold thread on the sashes tied to the chairs. Even the linen table runners had been ironed until there wasn’t a single wrinkle.

Standing alone in the room, I felt a burning desire to rise above my insecurities brought about by the people of Antla, by the merpeople who decided not to extend grace, by Hannah who didn’t respect my title.

I straightened my shoulders and marched out of the ballroom.

Those rioters were my people, people I loved, and who loved me. Maybe she was right, and they would listen if I showed up and pleaded with them to hear me out.

“Emma, where are you?” I raised my voice. “Emma? Emma?”

She sprinted back from the terrace and took a couple of deep breaths before she answered, “Yes, Your Highness?”

“I’m going to speak to the chief advisor. I’m going to do as you say. Please, can you make sure the west terrace is clear? I’m going to make a speech to the public.”

Her eyes opened wide, and she nodded. “Of course.” She gave me a little curtsey. “When do you want to speak to the people?”

“One hour from now. That should give us all enough time to collect everyone.” I hesitated before I built up my voice. “I can do this!”

Emma bent her knees with a huge grin as if I had gifted her a million shells. “I’ll have the others spread the word. We’ll get everyone to gather by that balcony,” she said before she ran out of the room.

My next visit was to the palace chief advisor. He was the highest-ranking person in the palace after the actual royal family.

“John?” I said after knocking on his office door. Almost immediately, the chief advisor opened the door. John was a tall, reedy man in his early fifties, always immaculately dressed with never a hair out of place.

“Your Highness.” He greeted me as enthusiastically as only John could do, which wasn’t a lot. “It’s good to see you. I’m sure your parents will be happy that you have returned. Would you like me to send word to them?”

“Yes,” I replied hurriedly. “But after that, I need you to get the staff back in as quickly as possible. I also need you to send word to the townsfolk to come to the palace. I’m giving a speech in just under an hour on the west balcony.”

John’s eyes widened. “A speech? What kind of speech?” He clearly didn’t think I was up to the job.

Perhaps he was right, but I was determined to do it anyway.

“I was in the AML, and I’ve just spent the last few days underwater with a merman. I think I’m the only one in a position to see both sides.”

His eyes almost popped out of his head at my admission, his mouth hanging open comically.

“John!” I shouted, to snap him out of it.

“Oh, yes, right. I’ll get to it.” He disappeared into his office before coming right back out again. “I wonder if it would be prudent to let me help you with the speech?” he said, reverting back to his normal efficient self.

“No, thank you, John, I’ve got it.”

I gave him a wink, feeling more confident than I had any right to, and headed back to my room. If I was going to deliver a speech in front of goodness only knew how many people, then I was going to look my best while I did it.

After carefully applying my makeup and finding a better dress to wear, I began the walk to the west balcony, rehearsing what I was going to say in my head.

Emma found me halfway along the main corridor. She had to run to keep up with me.

“The messengers have gone out, and the west balcony is ready. I’ve instructed the few guards I found to help out and...”

“Thank you,” I said, cutting her off mid-flow. My brain was scrambled enough without needing to know more. Either people would show up, or they wouldn’t.

I had no doubt the Conch would send some reporters out at the first hint of the princess making a speech. I wondered if they already knew where I'd been for the past few days. Probably. I thought back to the way Jimenez had looked at Fish. It was the same look of disgust I'd used when I first saw him.

Still, I didn't have time for regrets. I was on my way to make things right. If Jimenez had told The Conch that I'd been in the ocean with a merman, then so be it. It would come out one way or another, and if the people didn't already know, they soon would.

We headed to the west end of the palace and climbed the tower to the balcony overlooking the town. The very same balcony where my mother and father had kissed on the day of their wedding and where I'd been introduced to the people. I rarely ventured to this part of the palace except for royal occasions that dictated I must parade myself in front of the public. Two guards stood in front of the doors and pushed them open at my nod. They sounded the trumpets, and I stepped onto the balcony.

Nothing prepared me for just how many people had turned up at such short notice. I'd purposely left as little time as possible so I wouldn't have to speak to so many, but the square at the other side of the palace wall was heaving with people. The noise was deafening.

Underneath my long dress, my legs trembled. The people shouted obscenities and raised their fists in my direction. A quick sweep of the crowd told me that there were many AML members in attendance. I couldn't see Hannah, but I knew she had to be there somewhere.

"People of Atlantice!" I began, my voice wavering.

Barely anyone stopped their own yelling to listen to me. I cleared my throat, pulled myself up to my full height, and tried again.

"People of Atlantice!" I shouted.

More people raised their eyes and lowered their arms, and then silence cut through.

"I come to you today to beg you to halt the rioting and to stop the fighting. We're better than this."

A few more lowered their arms, but only to cross them, their faces filled with acrimony as they stared at me.

"As Atlanticeans, we are better than this," I repeated, trying to remember everything I'd rehearsed on the short walk through the palace.

“We have always known how to converse with each other so that we are all heard.”

“You traitor!” someone shouted from the crowd.

I guessed my days with Fish hadn’t gone unnoticed after all.

Emma drew closer and reached for my hand, keeping a step back so she wouldn’t share the limelight.

Taking a deep breath, I allowed the multitude of boos to be subdued by my silence.

I raised my voice an octave higher, “We are from a small island, but we are mighty and strong. We are passionate about our beliefs, but we’re also caring and can listen to the other side.”

I met the glances of several, who nodded.

“I’ve been underwater and spent time with the merpeople.”

The group that had originally booed shouted more obscenities again along with the AML crowd, but I waited, scanning the area and lingering to meet the eyes of those who seemed to be listening.

“Yes, I’ve actually met a few merpeople, and they’re not the killers we’ve been led to believe. They are not evil. They’re not killing our fisherman.” I shook my head. “They’re actually like us. They’ve been hurt like you have by the lies the AML told. You know that I was part of the AML and that I also believed their propaganda, but that is all it was.”

I took a deep breath and looked around the crowd.

“Propaganda brought to you by hate-mongers. I’m ashamed to say I was one of them. For a long time, I listened to them and believed them, just as you have been listening to them, but I was wrong. I was very wrong.”

The crowd paid attention with only a handful protesting now, their voices lower as other people waved at them to stop.

“And those lies that I, along with many of you, believed and spread hurt us all. They pitted us against the merfolk and them against us.” I placed my free hand against my heart. “I’m truly sorry that I was deceived, and in turn, I passed on the lie to more members of the AML than I care to list.”

The crowd buzzed, but they, at least, no longer shouted.

“I was saved by a merman just eleven days ago. He didn’t have to save me, but he did. Does that ring true with what you’ve been told?”

I paused as a group of AML people jeered “liar” and “traitor.” Finally, my eyes rested on Hannah, who had muscled her way to the front. She glared at me from her position on the street. I could tell this was hurting her.

Emma leaned back and pulled on my hand but didn’t release it.

Ignoring Emma, I continued, “Can any of you honestly say that you know of a firsthand account where a merperson hurt you? Or did you wrong? I’m not talking about the garbage spewed by the AML, but something you’ve witnessed with your own eyes?”

The crowd was noticeably quieter now, so I carried on.

“I know the business owners are struggling. I know they are losing money because of all this hate. I can see some of you down there. Shop owners that had a roaring trade a few weeks ago, thanks to the money brought in by the merfolk. Now that you’ve allowed yourselves to be bullied into not selling to the merfolk, aren’t you suffering as much as they are? I know a lot of you want to open your shops to everyone, and I know the AML has threatened you if you do.”

More and more people nodded their head, and a dozen or so actually clapped. Hannah screamed, “All lies,” and her people booed as she began to lead them out of the square. I watched her barging past the rest of the townsfolk, her AML cronies in her wake.

“Please help me to heal our town and establish good relationships with the merpeople so that we can live in peace. If we are able to work with the merpeople, then our fishermen will be safe from sharks and any other threats in the water.”

The AML reached the edge of the crowd and shouted, “Death to the merpeople” and “We’ll hunt them down until they’re all extinguished,” but I continued encouraging the people who stayed.

“We can get along with each other and work together to restore peace to our great island.”

Surprisingly, only a dozen people stormed out with Hannah, and I smiled at the majority of the town who remained.

“Thank you so much for your willingness to listen. To help me stop the disruption these riots have caused our town.” I blew a kiss out to the crowd. “I love you all, and again, thank you for listening to me. We can work together to return to our peaceful state.”

The crowd clapped as I left the balcony.

Emma squeezed my hand. “Princess Blaise, you did amazing. I knew that you could do it!”

I could barely breathe from the anxiety that speaking to the people had produced. My stomach was in knots, but as I looked into Emma’s beaming face, I knew I’d made a change.

How much of a change remained to be seen, but I’d gotten through to some of them. That was as much as I could hope for.

“Thank you for having faith in me.” I beamed, bringing Emma into a hug.

The palace had come to life in the short time I was out on the balcony. The sounds of the staff coming back filled me with joy. At the bottom of the tower, John greeted me.

“You did very well, Your Highness. The king and queen would be proud of you.”

It was high praise indeed from John, the man of few words. I thanked him and headed out to the beach. A couple of guards patrolled the perimeter, but nothing like the presence from the week before. They paid me no mind as I kicked off my shoes and ran out onto the sand.

Meandering to the pier, I scanned the vastness of the sea with a huge grin.

I wondered how Fish had done with the merfolk. After all, I wasn’t the only one trying to win the people over. Fish had been trying to do the same.

I waited impatiently for him to surface, dipping my feet into the cold water. Without him holding me, it was much too cold to keep them in for too long, and yet I longed to jump right in. After all that time in the water, I was confident I could swim without Fish’s help. What I wasn’t confident of was not turning blue.

“Fish, where are you?” I shouted, pulling my feet back up onto the pier and wrapping my arms around my legs.

A thought occurred to me that he might be waiting for me in the tunnel, so I stood up and headed back into the palace. Inside, I was greeted by many members of staff as I rushed to get to my destination.

Pulling open the secret door behind the bookcase, I headed out into the underground tunnel. There, waiting for me, was Fish. Ripples on the surface gave him away. In the dim light, I could barely see a thing, but I could hear the splashes in the water. Sitting down on the steps, I began to

pull my clothes off so I could join him. I laid my jacket neatly to my side before pulling my dress off.

“I think they listened to me,” I jabbered excitedly as I folded the dress and placed it on the jacket. In only my bra and panties, I took a breath and leapt into the water to the spot where Fish was waiting for me.

As it always did when he touched me, warmth shot through my body, but this time, it was accompanied by a strange buzzing sensation. Something flashed in front of me, lighting up his face, but it wasn’t him at all.

I was looking into the face of the Sea Witch.

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The Kingdom of Fairytales authors hope you enjoyed this new way of reading. We don't think that a series has ever been set with one chapter a day thought a whole year before and we hope we did it justice.

With this in mind, please leave a review, but when you do, remember that these books were always meant to be short breaks in your day and the blurb reflects that.

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THE KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES TEAM

These books would not be written without a great many people. Here is our team:

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Audrey enjoys volunteering with children of all ages at church, especially the enthusiastic teenagers, and teaching the Junior Achievement curriculums at local middle and high schools. She also loves to travel with her family and walking on the beach right near the homes of the mega-rich and billionaires.

Audrey is also the author of Thinking about Love, Where there's smoke there's Fire and Masquerading our Love along with many more.

Join her newsletter here

ABOUT J.A.ARMITAGE

J.A lives in a total fantasy world (because reality is boring right?) When she's not writing all the crazy fun in her head, she can be found eating cake, designing pretty pictures and hanging upside down from the tallest climbing frame in the local playground while her children look on in embarrassment. She's travelled the world working as everything from a banana picker in Australia to a Pantomime clown, has climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the bottom of the Grand Canyon and once gave birth to a surrogate baby for a friend of hers.

She spends way too much time gossiping on facebook and if you want to be part of her Reading Army, where you'll get lots of freebies, exclusive sneak peeks and super secret sales, join up here

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Somehow she finds time to write.